



ONCE UPON A TIME SLIP

LISA NICELL TREANOR

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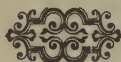


For my soulmate, Brian, and my crazy box of frogs, Tristan and Ashton!

"Imagination is the only weapon in the war against reality."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

CHAPTER I
A SMASHING TIME



China could feel the little hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. Although she had been home alone for the past two nights, she knew she was being watched. She had heard about the poltergeist outbreak in the area, but nothing had prepared her for her first encounter with the paranormal. Her hands trembled and her heart thumped right through her silk nightdress with every deafening knock on the empty kitchen table she was sitting at. Then she heard it speak for the first time.

"I am death," it rasped in a slow, low-pitched growl, sounding half-human and half-animal. Even though she had just turned nineteen, China shook anxiously from head to toe like a child, utterly gripped by her fear of the unknown.

The knocking on the table before her became so loud and so violent that the entire table started to shake and lifted itself six inches from the ground. This was the final straw for China. She tore herself free from her chair and raced out of the room into the hallway, screaming all the way. A large pair of wrinkly, old hands reached out to grab her by the shoulders as she slipped on the floor, hitting the side of her head on the antique grandfather clock by the staircase. Her throat felt as if it had been ripped open from

all the screaming. Her petite body lay stretched out on the floor. Long, wavy, blonde locks of hair trailed across her face. Her eyes were closed when she heard her grandfather's softly spoken voice say, "China, I came home as soon as I heard about the outbreak. It's OK, your grandfather is here now."

China's grandfather, Mr Clarence Winter, was a well-respected inventor and toymaker. He was a man who had worked hard all his life and now that he was in his sixties, it was starting to show on his wrinkled face. His snow-white, wiry, bushy eyebrows matched the white wisps of hair that did their best to cover his balding head. Although he looked his age, he still had a pleasant countenance. Mr Winter dabbled in antiques and sometimes liked to upcycle them to fashion new inventions and toys. He owned one of the largest workshops in existence, which boasted six storeys and over one thousand members of staff. The workshop was in fact an enormous and powerful steam-powered airship, which docked in different locations over the years to seek new customers. His staff consisted of a fleet of both humanoid and automated robots. Not one single human worked for Mr Winter and that was the way he liked it. He felt that humans had too many personal problems and were not as reliable or loyal as robots. Robots had no feelings and didn't care for financial gain. Robots were the future.

China was only five years old and her brother, Maddox, was sixteen when they had become orphans. Mr Winter became a guardian to the two children and raised them both as if they were his own. He doted on his grandchildren.

Maddox had been away at boarding school the day of his parents' accident. China was with her parents when the tragedy occurred. Her father had been positively obsessed with aviation, collecting memorabilia from the very first days of flight right up to modern times. His passion was antique planes and he had clocked up an impressive number of air miles over the years, flying planes from his authentic collection, one of which was the very first to be built and used by the Wright brothers in 1903.

It was his fascination with the Wright brothers that had led

to the death of his wife and himself, when the two-man passenger plane that they had been flying collided with a Zeppelin airship. China had been sitting on her mother's lap and although she was seriously injured in the collision, she was miraculously nursed back to health by her grandfather, Mr Winter. Her grandfather had gone to great trouble to reassemble her shattered body after the crash and had fashioned an excellent pair of bionic legs for her, to replace hers after the amputation. His proudest invention of all, however, was the mechanical heart that beat within her chest. The mechanical heart operated through a similar mechanism to that of a clock. Mr Winter's genius invention not only saved China's life, but also lead to one of the most astounding wonders of all: an electric soul. Never before had a human's life been saved in such a way. Mr Winter hadn't only managed to rewire a human heart, but he also rewired a human soul.

Two years after their parents' death, Maddox went missing. He had just turned eighteen at the time. Mr Winter never got over the disappearance of his grandson and at times blamed himself for not keeping a tighter rein on the boy. That was so long ago now that China felt as if it could have been another lifetime since she last saw Maddox. She found it surreal to think that he would have just celebrated his thirtieth birthday with her, if he were still around.

Still shaking with fear, China focused on the figure in front of her. She was so relieved to see her grandfather standing over her in the hallway. She imagined that he would know exactly what to do and immediately felt safe in his presence. Living on the second floor of her grandfather's workshop, just above the store, had always seemed exciting to her. This was the first time that she had ever felt uncomfortable there.

"What are we going to do, Grandfather?" asked China. Her blue eyes widened as she searched his face for the answer. Her grandfather sighed deeply and shrugged his shoulders in response. China continued to impart the evening's events to him. "I was in the storeroom earlier this evening when a toolbox started to hover

in the air by itself. It flew across the room and smashed through a window."

"That does not surprise me one bit, China," her grandfather replied in a hushed tone as he dabbed at her forehead with a small brandy-soaked bandage. They were now sitting on a large sofa in the drawing room. China's grandfather frowned as he spoke. "I have heard reports of similar happenings all over town. No one knows quite what to do. I would never have left you on your own to go to that trade show if I had known." Mr Winter was visibly upset by the fact that his granddaughter had become distressed in his absence. She was his entire world and he would have done anything to protect her.

Mr Winter relayed accounts to his granddaughter of at least five customers in the area to whom he had made house calls in the past day alone. All five of his customers had been suffering from the effects of paranormal activity in their homes for well over a week. One woman was obliged to move her whole family out of their house and refused to re-enter until it had been cleansed of the entity. She could take no more. Her children were being slapped by invisible hands and having their hair pulled at night while lying in bed. The straw that broke the camel's back was when her husband had levitated five feet in the air, his eyes rolling back in his head, speaking in tongues.

"We can't possibly consider moving out of the workshop, Grandfather," gasped China as her grandfather stood up and walked towards the fireplace to throw the used bandages into the blazing fire. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm afraid I don't have the answer to that, China. One thing is for sure, though; I refuse to stock anymore Ouija boards in our toy store. Living in a haunted house shouldn't be considered a game."

Just then there was an ear-piercing sound of smashed cutlery coming from the kitchen. China and her grandfather cautiously made their way to the kitchen, searching the room with their eyes for the smashed cutlery. Not a single item was seen to be out of place, yet they could still hear the smashing of cutlery all around

them. China went to the cupboard and took out the salt. She began to sprinkle it all about the floor in a crazy, desperate attempt to rid their home of the unwanted entity. She had read something about salt being used to cleanse haunted houses back in the 1900s.

“Well, anything is worth a try, I guess,” chuckled Mr Winter. “Some people have even taken up praying. Imagine that!” Mr Winter held his side as he laughed. As his hearty laugh ceased, he began to frown. He found it hard to believe that in the year 2258, with all the technology and mind-blowing discoveries that had been made, there was no explanation for the paranormal. No one ever came close to solving the mysteries of haunted houses or poltergeists. No one had ever confirmed that there was an afterlife. All that Mr Winter could be sure of was that hauntings and poltergeist outbreaks were on the increase. Attacks could last several months or several years and nothing could be done to stop them or prevent them from happening.

Poltergeist outbreaks were fast becoming the norm worldwide these days and scientists were still at a loss to explain why. The world was still only coming to grips with the most recent discovery of the century: the existence of the multi-verse. For centuries, scientists had been aware of planet earth’s existence within our own universe and had over time developed theories about parallel universes. It wasn’t until recent times, however, that the existence of our planet within countless multi-verses had finally been proven. This led to the great unveiling of the world’s most exciting discovery of all – time travel. The fact was, though, that time travel had of course been around since the early 1900s, but had been kept hidden from mankind for several centuries until the discovery of the multi-verse, which in turn led to the rediscovery of time travel.

Scientists had never fully understood the laws of physics, which guarded that mysterious world of the paranormal. Many theories were suggested over the centuries, but none were ever proven. Modern day scientists began to forge a link between the recent discovery of the multi-verse and the world of the paranormal, yet

not a trace of evidence was ever found to link the two. The general public had their own beliefs and held strongly to the popular opinion that poltergeists were some sort of time travellers. It was no mere coincidence that the increase in time travel had led to a rise in poltergeist attacks. There had to be some correlation.

Then there were those who held the view that poltergeists were the spirits of the dead. This was an equally plausible argument. In recent years, there seemed to have been an unaccountable amount of cases of dead relatives roaming the streets, refusing to rest in their graves. Reports of such sightings soared with the increase of poltergeist outbreaks. Cities, towns and rural populations all over the world were fast becoming infested with all manner of hauntings and seemed to become hotbeds for the walking dead.

Spirit communication and investigations only seemed to add fuel to the fire and lead to more and more questions and frustration. The only logical thing anyone could ever do during a haunting was to pack their bags and run away from the problem in the hope that it wouldn't follow.

"We'll give it another day or so and if it continues, we shall move the workshop," declared Mr Winter.

China's eyes lit up at the suggestion of moving. There was something so exciting about living in a flying workshop. Another of her grandfather's wonderful inventions – an airborne workshop and living quarters rolled into one enormous, steam-powered airship; an airship complete with a quantum-powered propeller system, hovercraft power and an anchor! It was all very old-fashioned stuff, but Mr Winter did always like a bit of vintage mixed with new technology. He felt it gave his inventions a certain edge.

China and her grandfather didn't go to bed that night, but chose to sit by the fire in the drawing room, keeping a vigil. They reminisced about past adventures in their flying workshop and discussed plans for the future of their business. All the while the furniture had been moving slightly here and there by itself all around the room. Tapping and banging noises could be heard in

the walls, on the floor and even coming from the ceiling. At three o' clock in the morning, a man's laughter could be heard echoing all about the room, along with invisible smashing glass. China pulled a rug about her shoulders for comfort rather than warmth and gazed into the flames of the fire as her grandfather finally dozed off on the chair across from her.

Struggling to fight the heaviness of her eyelids, China's mind began to flood with a sense of calm as she felt compelled to stare at the slivers of orange, white, yellow and red flames, which danced furiously through the woody, mossy logs piled up in the hearth.

The long, terrifying night finally gave way to an overcast morning. China opened her eyes slowly, surprised to find that she had slept a little and alarmed to see that her grandfather was no longer with her in the room. She walked out into the hallway and looked around cautiously. She followed the sweet smell of pancakes and hot chocolate wafting from the kitchen and smiled as her grandfather pulled out a chair at the kitchen table for her to join him. All was calm. The poltergeist had ceased making its racket and they both enjoyed a peaceful breakfast.

Mr Winter had been checking his holographic mail, or HG-mail as it was better known, when China sat down at the table. She wasn't at all put off by the large holographic projection of a robotic soldier yielding a massive machine gun, hovering in mid-air above the table. The headline read:

WAR LOOMS CLOSER

Mr Winter shook his head as he switched off his HG-mail.

"You know, there's talk of conscription, Grandfather," China broke the silence. "They want men and women between the ages of eighteen to forty-five, for military service," she added.

"If I have to keep moving shop and dropping the anchor in a new town every day to hide you from such a fate, I will," Mr Winter responded. "That or I will have to hide you in your wardrobe," he joked.

Just then a plate flew off the dresser and smashed against the wall.

"Good morning, Mr Poltergeist," retorted Mr Winter.

China remained silent, but gulped very hard at the thought of having to go to her room alone to shower and dress for the day with a poltergeist on the loose.

The morning went by as any other for China. She spent most of her mornings serving customers in the store and her evenings in the workshop, learning whatever she could from her grandfather about the business. Someday, China wanted to be a wonderful inventor like her grandfather. She would discover new wonders of the world and invent the most genius inventions. She had already learned how to rewire an old antique radio and convert it into a digital doll's house. Her latest training consisted of learning how to make clocks. Her grandfather was a most excellent clockmaker. He made the most wonderful timepieces. China was fascinated by clocks. She knew just about everything there was to know about them. She had learned all about the history of clockmaking from her grandfather. He taught her about the very first timekeeping devices: sundials, water clocks, sand-filled hourglasses and candle clocks. The first ever clock that China's grandfather had taught her to make was a mechanical clock using escapements driven by weights. She had never forgotten the moment of delight as it began to tick for the first time. As she got older, she learned all there was to know about spring-driven clocks, pendulum clocks, quartz, atomic and quantum clocks. Her fascination for clocks developed after hearing tales of adventures from time travellers who happened to come into the store every once in a while. Time travel was such a common occurrence these days that people almost began to take it for granted.

A new shipment of parcels had been delivered to the store just before lunchtime. China liked to be the first to open the large parcels and crates to see what magnificent new merchandise had arrived. There was never a day went by when she wasn't in awe of the contents of the parcels and crates that arrived.

She wrenched open the first crate with a miniature steel crowbar that she removed from the tool belt around her delicate waist. The crate mostly contained a load of antique books, diaries and hand-drawn maps dating back to the Middle Ages. The dust and cobwebs were thickly wrapped around the books and had to be dusted off carefully with a soft cloth before being placed on the display in the library section of the store.

The second crate she opened contained a random collection of broken toys, bits and bobs. This crate was to be brought straight into the warehouse, its contents to be used for spare parts. Two more crates remained, which stored the most unusual of antiques: strange looking medical equipment dating back to the 1700s, which looked more like instruments of torture. There were numerous musical instruments, centuries-old oil paintings, one of the first ever Gutenberg printing presses and a number of antique clocks. Most of the smaller parcels contained antique jewellery, old letters and documents. The last parcel that China had to sort through contained a set of miniature tools, gears, springs, escape-ments, pendulums and clock hands: all the equipment necessary to repair an antique clock.

It took most of the afternoon to sort through the deliveries and put everything in its correct place. When she had packed the last few items away, China stood in the middle of the store on the large circular Victorian rug that dressed up the worn-looking wooden floor boards. She slowly spun around on her heels, taking in her handy work so far that day and examining the store shelves and table tops, looking for faults. She could find none. Everything was in perfect order for a store of its character. She was always enthralled by the olde-world charm and magical vibe that the store seemed to convey to its customers.

The shelves and table tops were choc-o-block with all manner of items: old gadgets, modern appliances, electrical and digital equipment, as well as antique kettles, mirrors, globes, lamps, radios, rustic furniture and furnishings. Large, elaborate wall hangings, rugs, wooden chests, toys and vintage clothing further added

to the quirky vibe that customers enjoyed. The store was an Aladdin's cave of treasure for antique collectors. It was the type of store that sold absolutely everything one could imagine and could offer customers a mixture of the old and the new forged into one item. Antiques, old toys and the most modern technological inventions could easily be merged together on a whim. Mr Winter liked to work by commission and enjoyed tailor-making an item to suit a customer's individual wants and needs. Part of being an inventor, he felt, was to be willing to adapt products to suit the customer's pallet. Everything came down to personal taste. Some people wanted modern inventions, while others liked to mix the new with the old.

Mr Winter was capable of creating anything; all he required was the customer's specifications. Sometimes, if he felt that the customer didn't quite know what it was that they wanted, he would unleash the genius of his imagination upon them. He forged modern electrical and digital appliances from the rarest of antiques. He made mini personal computers out of old books, toys and robots from old scrap junk, and converted old radios and television sets into holographic projectors. He had once created a teleportation pod out of an old telephone box.

Taking one final look around, China was happy to see the order, which she had helped to accomplish, throughout the store. It was pleasing to be surrounded by such organisation, despite the fact that the poltergeist was busy smashing everything within its path, wherever it chose to lurk.

The previous night's paranormal events were obviously still on her mind as she jumped slightly at the sight of herself in a gold-gilded mirror beside a bookcase. She paused a while in front of the mirror and having regained her composure, she sifted through her pockets for her lipstick and fixed herself up before fiddling with her scarf. China wasn't one for following fashion, preferring to set her own trend. She like to wear fluffed out, *Alice in Wonderland*-type dresses with tight-fitted trousers underneath and a pair of steel-cap boots, which were a necessity for the type of work she

did in the workshop. She wore a brown, leather toolbelt around her waist and a white apron. Her apron had large pockets to the sides for carrying bits and bobs, and her dress had a few patches, which she had hand-sewn herself, as she liked to make do and mend her own clothes. She always wore large, white, pearl earrings and an old-fashioned locket around her neck. The locket was an antique passed down from a great grandmother. It contained pictures of her parents and her brother, as well as a small windup key, which she used every now and again to wind up her mechanical heart when it began to slow down or skip too many beats.

China walked over to the counter and lifted a rusty, old, hand-held bell. She shook it three times to signal to the servants that it was time for afternoon tea. Thankfully, much of the haunting seemed to be confined to the living quarters and didn't much affect the store or the rest of the workshop. This meant that business could continue as usual.

China awaited her afternoon tea as she sat in the corner of the store at a small, round, antique table beside a large, wooden bookshelf, which went all the way from the ground up to the high ceiling. It was the type of bookshelf that was built into the corner of the room and had a rather ancient-looking ladder attached to it for reaching the books near the ceiling. Books were a rarity these days. They had stopped producing books over one hundred years ago. Books had been wiped out by modern technology and had become much sought-after commodities.

China often liked to browse through a book while taking her afternoon tea. It was always the same routine: a six-foot tall, automated robot made of stainless steel with brass fittings and large, red, glowing eyes carried a silver tray into the room; the tray was always laden with sandwiches and cakes, two dainty cups with matching saucers and a large tea pot. Mr Winter would serve the customers while China took her tea. He would take his tea standing at the counter as he worked away. China would sit and sip her tea while reading about historical places and people who had long since perished. She was fascinated with stories from the past

and fantasised about travelling back in time to visit the weird and wonderful places and people that she had read about in history books.

Even though time travel was possible in those days, it wasn't for the faint hearted. As much as she always wanted to time travel, China dared not do it. It was still a relatively new concept and wasn't a one-hundred-percent reliable form of transport. There were some disreputable time travel companies in operation who offered a cheap service and it was increasingly common for companies to send people on a one-way passage back in time, leaving many time travellers stranded in the past or the future, unable to return to the present. There were numerous cases of people becoming lost in time. A lot of people began to fear time travel and chose not to meddle with the laws of physics. Many firmly believed in the expression: 'Curiosity killed the time traveller!'

Of course, not every time traveller fell off the face of the earth. Quite a few made a return trip and had the most enchanting tales to tell. China loved nothing more than to listen to time travellers' stories whenever they happened to come into the store. Some of the stories she heard were unbelievable. People had travelled back and forth hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. Every person who ever travelled back or forth in time seemed to have the most astounding experiences and all would agree that it was the most exciting time of their lives. Although she would have loved to experience the thrill of time travel for herself, China was reluctant to throw caution to the wind for fear of becoming lost in time. She still had memories of an old school friend who had gone time travelling with her family a few years back and had never returned. There were just too many cases like that and besides, her grandfather had always frowned upon the idea. He maintained that time travel interfered with the laws of nature and that such interference was more than likely the reason why so many people were disappearing. He believed that when people were born, they were allocated a time and a place in the universe and that no one had the right to alter time, nor visit alternative universes. China's

grandfather was a very intelligent man and she trusted his judgement more than anything.

Drinking the last drop of tea from her teacup, China closed the thick, withered-looking book she was reading. It was time to get back to work. She clambered up the library ladder to replace the book, but just as she got to the top, there was an almighty crashing sound, which startled her so much that she almost lost her footing and had to quickly balance herself while tightening her grip. She gaped, open mouthed at the smashed crockery scattered around the table and all about the ground below her. The teapot, an antique passed down through the generations from her great grandmother, was in several tiny pieces. It took a few moments for what had just happened to register with her. It wasn't until she noticed her grandfather running towards what remained of the store's front window that she realised the entire window pane had been smashed in. There were large shards of glass as well as tiny pieces of glass scattered all around the floor. Then a lady customer fainted and fell to the floor. The first thought that came into China's head was that it was the work of the poltergeist, but when she glanced back down at the mess below her feet, she saw a large cement brick lying on the floor next to the bits of broken teapot. There was a piece of rolled-up paper tied to the brick by a length of string. Guessing that it was some class of a message, she almost slid back down the ladder in anticipation to read it. By now her grandfather was at her side, as she unwrapped the string from the brick and unfolded the piece of paper. He gasped as he caught sight of the note in her hand.

"It's a poster," exclaimed China with a puzzled expression on her face.

"Yes, China," replied her grandfather. "It's a recruitment poster for the war, a call to arms. I was asked to hang one of these posters up on the front door yesterday, but I refused."

China studied the poster for more detail. There was a picture of two smiling soldiers, one male and one female, both holding machine guns. Printed in black ink, the top of the poster read:

MAKE YOUR FAMILY PROUD - GO TO WAR.

The bottom of the poster, which was printed in bold, red ink, read:

ONLY COWARDS AWAIT CONSCRIPTION.

"Maybe we should be thinking about moving along soon," suggested China's grandfather. "I will not tolerate being bullied by the War Office."

"Well, the area is infested with poltergeists, so it might be a good idea to get away," responded China. "But where will we go, Grandfather?" she asked.

Her grandfather couldn't answer that question and suggested that they should both sleep on it.

China was sad to have to move town once again. She felt as if they had never spent long enough in any one town to call it their home. Yet there was also the sense of adventure, which came with flying off to a new location and dropping the anchor some place entirely different to the last.



LATER THAT EVENING China and her grandfather retired to the workshop. Mr Winter was in the process of teaching his granddaughter how to make a pendulum clock from scratch. This was vital training for her if she wanted to become a master horologist like her grandfather. There was nothing like spending an evening making clocks to enable Mr Winter to unwind and help him process his thoughts. The reality that they would have to move home suddenly struck Mr Winter and he realised that there was nothing that could be done about it until the following day. It was too late in the evening to start making arrangements and so he decided that it was best left until the morning. For now, he would dismiss such thoughts and lose himself in the moment. Clock-

making was the best therapy for allowing oneself to focus on the task at hand and completely forget one's troubles.

China listened closely as her grandfather listed the basic parts that they would need to make a pendulum clock: a weight or spring, a weight gear train, an escapement, a hand gear train and a setting mechanism. Mr Winter explained the purpose of each part and then proceeded to piece the parts together to build a clock. Watching her grandfather intensely and copying him step by step, China used an extra set of parts to construct a clock of her own. Mr Winter went on to explain that pendulums don't swing on their own forever and that it is the job of the escapement to ensure that a pendulum continues to swing. The word 'escapement' seemed to strike a chord with China and brought to mind the fact that she and her grandfather would soon be making their own escape, moving somewhere far away to flee the paranormal activity that tormented them.



MR WINTER TOSSED and turned that night in bed, trying to shake off the thoughts of having to relocate his business the next day. China was awake until the early hours of the morning, listening to the ticking from the pendulum clock that she had just made and hung up on her bedroom wall. It was a noise that she would eventually get used to and although it seemed to guise itself as the irritation that kept her from sleeping, it was actually her own thoughts that had kept her awake. She had been reflecting on the fact that she was going to lose some good friends from the area when they moved away. It was always difficult to say goodbye to old chums, but it was part and parcel of living and working in a mobile workshop. The ticking of the clock eventually gave way to drowsiness and China finally drifted off, knowing that the morning would bring new adventures.



CHINA'S GRANDFATHER was up at the crack of dawn the next morning, making enquires for a new destination to dock their workshop. He had been using an 1876 antique telephone, which he had repaired and restored to its former glory. It was one of the first ever telephones to be invented by Alexander Graham Bell and Mr Winter had adjusted it to create a holographic phone. Each person that Mr Winter had contacted was projected in full before his eyes.

Holographic communication was the most popular means of keeping in touch with the rest of the world. China used the holographic telephone to contact her friends and say her goodbyes. It was as if they were standing in the room with her when she spoke to them. It was the next best thing to saying goodbye in person and it was an excellent way to keep in contact with her friends.

"All aboard for Liverpool!" Mr Winter could be heard mumbling to himself as he ended his last call. China's eyes widened with fascination as she overheard his words.



BY LUNCHTIME the store was closed and the workshop was ready for lift off. The workshop relied on four large, steam-powered engines and the latest in quantum hover technology. The main flight deck was operated by two humanoid robots, which gave China's grandfather the freedom to turn his hand to more useful tasks. Humanoid robots were on an entirely different level to the clunky, awkward, automated robots, which looked every inch like the mechanical pieces of machinery that they were. Humanoids were fashioned to resemble humans as much as was physically possible, while automatons were simply designed to carry out their orders without the need to look aesthetically pleasing to the eye.

It always fascinated China to watch the humanoids in action. It was almost impossible to tell them apart from humans. They had real human skin, teeth, hair and nails. All they lacked were human organs. Some, though not all, were programmed to respond to and

display human emotions and affection. The resemblance to humans was sometimes uncanny. Each humanoid had the most advanced quantum mechanical hard drive system known to man in place of a brain. They were capable of almost anything, which, as China's grandfather often pointed out, could be a very fortunate thing or, in the wrong hands, could be a complete disaster.

China often sat and stared at the humanoids in action, pondering the fact that they could almost pass for humans. But being programmed to display human emotions wasn't quite the same thing as being human, which made her wonder if they were capable of any real feelings. She was half-mechanical after all, but still she felt entirely human. Her grandfather often referred to her as a mechanical doll, with her bionic legs, her quantum hard drive wiring and her mechanical, beating heart.

It was hard not to let the negative thoughts creep into her mind late that night as she lay in her bed, staring at the ceiling. She didn't like to think about the humanoids in the darkness of her room at night, with their cold, unblinking eyes and their aloof and almost smug manner of perfecting every task they were programmed to carry out. As much as she struggled not to see their uncaring features in her mind's eye, they seemed to slither into her thoughts. She hated to think that she was anything like them and she worried herself into a fretful sleep some nights, with the unsettling thought that she too one day might become aloof, detached and inhuman like they were. It upset her to think that she might lose the ability to feel emotions and affection. She often wondered exactly how much of her was considered human and how much was mechanical. Thankfully, the break of dawn peeking through her curtains in the early hours of each morning usually softened her thoughts. The warm daylight spreading out across her bedroom always seemed to soothe the darkest corners of her mind.

For once, China did not have to wait for the morning to come to rescue her from the thoughts which usually overcrowded her mind like thorny bushes. She smiled to herself as she stared out into the inky darkness of night, through the window at the foot of

her bed. The excitement of relocating filled her head with positive notions, which chased the darkness from her mind. She was overwhelmed by her imagination, dreaming up all sorts of images of their next destination. Thoughts raced through her mind about the different kinds of people she would meet and the thrilling new experiences she would encounter. Moving to a new continent was inspiring and thought-provoking. She was already beginning to map out new plans for the business. A new location would bring fresh business their way. There were going to be so many new opportunities for her to gain extra skills and develop innovative ideas. England was fast becoming the up and rising hotspot for new inventors and was exactly the place China wanted to move to.

Knowing that the excitement of moving abroad was going to keep her awake for much of the night, she decided to motivate herself by rereading one of her favourite antique books: the autobiography of one of the world's most famous inventors – Nikola Tesla. Tesla was one of China's heroes. He had led the most amazing life and created the most magnificent inventions. It amused her to think that a man who was born in 1856 in Croatia had invented the world's first ever alternating current motor, bringing the age of electric power into being. The idea simply came to him one day as he was strolling through a park discussing poetry.

Without Tesla, people would have lived in a dark world with no electricity. The electric light, radios, televisions and computers would never have existed if it were not for Nikola Tesla. The man was a complete genius and yet he died a pauper, having never made a single penny from his inventions or patents. He seemed to be robbed of so many of his ingenious ideas and received virtually no recognition or credit for much of his important work within his lifetime. Marconi was credited with inventing the first ever radio, but his equipment was based on Tesla's ideas. Tesla was among the very first inventors to experiment with X-rays and had created what he termed to be 'shadowgraphs'. He had spent much time working for Thomas Edison's electric company, but was ripped off

by him, Edison refusing to pay him for his work. Edison became Tesla's arch enemy and did everything in his power to destroy his ambitions, leaving him destitute. It wasn't until long after his death that he began to receive any recognition at all.

China felt as if she had so much in common with Tesla. She was sure that had she ever had the opportunity to meet the man in the flesh, they would have hit it off. They both studied mechanics and electricity with a view to becoming engineers. Both could solve calculus problems in their heads and had photographic memories. While China was inspired by her grandfather to experiment with new inventions, Tesla's earliest influence was his mother who liked to dabble in inventing household appliances and can be credited for inventing the world's first eggbeater! China was also really impressed that he was the inventor of the first ever electric clock based on mechanical vibrations.

There were so many scientific theories and predictions that Tesla had made in his lifetime, which only came to fruition long after his death. His best kept secret was only revealed to the world after the discovery of the multi-verse. It was the mother of all inventions and Tesla's greatest gift to the world. It had been proven centuries after his death that Tesla was in fact the inventor of the first ever time machine. Time travel was his most astonishing invention of all, although it was hidden from the world for so long.

The American Government of the day had seized Tesla's laboratory and all his papers upon discovering the enormity of his latest invention. He was deemed to be an obsessive-compulsive and pushed to the edge of a breakdown, having been roughed up by the authorities. The government made Tesla an outcast in society and had ensured that he would never again receive any means of assistance or funding for future projects. It was the intention of the American Government to take total control of and responsibility for the world's first time travel device.

It wasn't until long after modern day scientists had rediscovered time travel that a whistle-blower had come forward to reveal

a bunch of Tesla's old diaries, long since confiscated by the government, in which he had recorded many of his early time travel experiences.

China flicked the pages forward in the book to the ninth chapter. This was her favourite section of the book as it described some of Tesla's earliest time travel experiments. Her eyes frantically scanned the pages for a particular paragraph, which she had remembered reading before. She held her breath ever so slightly when she stumbled across it again. She read the paragraph to herself, truly animated by the words on the page.

It read:

Tesla's first ever time travel experiment took place in the city of Liverpool, England in 1918.

To think that she would walk the streets of Liverpool the very next day, where her idol once held his first historic time travel experiment. It was hardly conceivable. She closed the book and placed it back on the shelf of the oak bookcase, to the side of her four-poster bed. She lay her head down on her lace-trimmed pillow with absolutely no intention of falling asleep. She wanted to make herself comfortable while she imagined what Liverpool would be like. She was comfy and content until Tesla's autobiography, which she had just neatly placed on the bookcase, hit the wall the far side of the room. The poltergeist had come to her room for an unwelcome visit and didn't seem too pleased that China was so relaxed.

China quickly jumped in under the covers, pulling them well up to her neck as she looked all about the room, waiting for the next missile to become airborne. There was silence for at least one minute and then the entire bookcase came crashing down to the floor with an enormous thud. This was directly followed by footsteps, which seemed to climb the walls and thump across the ceiling above her bed. It was starting to get the better of her and so she leapt out of the bed and ran for the hallway, where she

bumped into her grandfather. He had heard the commotion and came up the stairs to check on her.

"Let's go downstairs and make some coffee," Mr Winter suggested.

The footsteps had followed them to the kitchen and seemed to circle the table as they sat drinking their coffees. Mr Winter had concluded that they would be better off returning to bed and trying to ignore the damn thing rather than losing another night's sleep. China had to agree that it was best to try and get some sleep and so she returned to her room. The poltergeist didn't follow her this time, but seemed to remain between the kitchen and drawing room, making a nuisance of itself, banging and pounding on the walls and the ceiling. The poltergeist seemed to almost protest the decision to move town by continuously smashing all the glass, porcelain and delph that came into its path throughout the household. Doors were slammed in a most violent manner, books and ornaments flew from their shelves and chairs began to levitate at least four feet into the air. It was a scene of utter chaos.

By midnight the haunting had ceased. The moon was glowing intensely against the night sky, illuminating China's bedroom. She lay in bed staring out the window at the glistening dots of light scattered across the sky. They were travelling at quite some speed, making the view outside her window almost mesmerising, as stars and occasional wisps of clouds whizzed by.

Leaving the Americas for England was a massive change for the future of the workshop. New business would have to be drummed up. They would have to attract new customers. It would be a whole new way of life for China, and her grandfather too. Despite the work that was ahead of them, China was very excited by the idea of starting over again. It was like working with a blank canvas. She felt that she could do anything she wanted. She could practically reinvent herself. Living in a thriving, vibrant city like Liverpool was going to be thrilling.

The excitement eventually lulled and China drifted off into a peaceful slumber. Her dreams were filled with enchantment. She

dreamt of the workshop soaring above the hills and valleys of the English countryside and Tesla standing in a brightly lit room with a pocket watch in his hand, whispering into her ear. The last part of her dream that she recalled as she woke was Tesla holding out a pocket watch in his hand and pointing at the Titanic, which had suddenly appeared in a thick mist before them. China looked down at her feet and realised that she was wearing a long, old-fashioned dress and had a wide-brimmed hat upon the crown of her head. Tesla smiled warmly at her before she woke up.

China tried in vain to make sense of her dreams. She had obviously spent too much time thinking about Tesla and their move to Liverpool the night before. She tried so hard to recall what Tesla had been whispering to her in the dream, but couldn't remember a thing he had told her. She was certain that he had been revealing his secrets to her, of how he had managed to smash through the barriers of time.



CHAPTER 2

WRONG PLACE, WRONG TIME



The journey to England meant that the workshop was airborne for much of the next day. Not having to work in the store meant that China and her grandfather could take a well-earned break and relax for the day. Mr Winter's idea of relaxing was to create new inventions. China, on the other hand, spent most of her day reading old books and journals. She rarely had the chance to read as often as she would like. It was unfortunate that many people in the modern world seldom had the opportunity to read, as books were so rare. Over time, technology had abolished the necessity for books, making them a thing of the past. China felt privileged to have access to an entire library of fascinating reading material.

The rain made a comforting pitter-patter beat on the windows and the roof of the workshop as they docked in the centre of Liverpool city later that night. The cosy feeling of contentment soon came to an abrupt end. There was an eerie atmosphere from the moment China stepped outside the workshop. The streets were completely deserted. Not one single human being, animal, hovercraft or robot could be seen for miles. Something didn't seem right. China felt her gut wrenching as her eyes searched all around

her for signs of life. She was aware from previous travels that cities were vibrant and exciting places to be at night; the streets were usually bursting with life. The desolate scene they had come upon was so very unusual. Something didn't quite add up.

China's grandfather was equally puzzled when he joined her outside on the street. After a moment, the silence, which seemed almost threatening, was suddenly broken by the high-pitched shrill of a whistle from a large, bulky figure of a man cycling in their direction. On closer inspection China's grandfather could see that it wasn't a man on a bike, but in fact a humanoid robot. The red, glowing eyes were a bit of a giveaway in the darkness of the night. The humanoid stopped blowing on its whistle when it got close enough to relay its message. It spoke with a cold and insipid tone of voice.

"A strict curfew is in operation on Bold Street between the hours of ten p.m. and six a.m. You are not permitted to loiter in this area during the curfew. Thank you for your cooperation."

As soon as the robot had delivered its message, it quickly pedalled away, fading into the night fog. China and her grandfather were still somewhat puzzled. The robot's message had explained why the streets were so deserted, but it hadn't given the reason for the enforcement of such a strict curfew. It wouldn't be until early the next morning when all would become clear.



DURING BREAKFAST THE NEXT MORNING, a visitor called to the workshop to welcome the new arrivals to town. A fat, middle-aged man wearing a red dickey bow and a hideously out of date, brown, tweed suit had come to inform China's grandfather that he was the Mayor of Liverpool and that it was his duty to counsel new business people who move to his district. He sat down at the breakfast table next to China. After a long-winded introduction, the Mayor took a sip of tea from his cup, which finally allowed China's grandfather to ask a question. China sat up straight, listening intently as

her grandfather asked the Mayor why the city implemented such a strict curfew at night. The Mayor began to sweat a little around his forehead and temples. He patted himself dry with a red handkerchief as he cautiously answered the question.

"Well, firstly, I would like to stress that there is no real threat of danger in the area. We do pride ourselves on having a low crime rate in our thriving city, but to answer your question ..." The Mayor paused for a moment as if trying to think of a gentle way of broaching the subject. "To answer your question," he repeated, "there have been rumours that Bold Street, its surrounding side streets and alleyways, are the location of a time slip." The Mayor laughed nervously as he uttered the last two words. His hands were jittery as he placed his teacup back on its saucer, spilling tea as the cup shook.

China couldn't contain her curiosity and bombarded the Mayor with a series of questions. She had heard of time slips occurring in different places throughout the world before, but it was a relatively rare phenomenon and no one she knew had ever met anyone who had encountered one. It wasn't the same thing as voluntary time travel; time slips were far more dangerous in nature. One moment a person could be walking down the street in their own time and place, then, without a moments warning, they are spontaneously transported into another time and place altogether. Very few people ever make it back to their own time and place to share their story.

The Mayor told China and her grandfather that Bold Street was a hot spot for time slips. There had been numerous reports of people going missing and being relocated in another time and place altogether. Even cats and dogs were increasingly becoming victims of time slips. The Mayor could tell by China's reaction that she found the idea of it utterly exciting, which prompted him to warn her of the dangers.

"Some people simply never return," he stated coldly as he stared into China's big blue eyes without blinking. He also added that any thrill seekers found wandering through Bold Street after

dark would surely find adventure in a night spent behind bars along with a hefty fine. Before the Mayor took his leave, he advised China's grandfather to relocate the business premises on a street outside of the curfew zone. He said that it was nothing short of a miracle that their entire workshop hadn't ended up disappearing overnight. That was enough of a warning for China's grandfather and he immediately set about flying the workshop several blocks away from the hot spot.

There was nothing to stop China from exploring the city, including the curfew zone, by day and that was exactly what she spent the next few weeks doing. The city was different in so many ways to the cities that she had been to in the Americas. The large, dated buildings, the olde-world feel of the streets and architecture, the occasional old-fashioned modes of transport, such as horse-drawn carriages, trams and even the odd antique car gave the city a retro and old-fashioned vibe. People in this day and age didn't have to rely on cars, buses or trains as a means of transport anymore. People liked to get around independently by means of jetpacks. The skies in big cities across the Americas were cluttered with people flying here and there by jetpack, not to mention the amount of homes and business premises that were hovering through the air. Some businesses and home owners chose to remain airborne simply to avoid paying taxes. But the most popular form of transport for those on long-distance journeys was still teleportation. Being instantly transported to your desired destination in seconds, with no queuing or having to sit next to other passengers in cramped conditions, was the future of transportation.

As time ticked on, China's daily routine in her new location was much the same as it was in any other city where she had lived before. Her mornings were spent serving customers in the store and in the evenings, she devoted her time to her education. She liked to spend time with her grandfather in the workshop, learning his secrets and she devoted additional time to studying a wide range of fascinating subjects, including: engineering, quantum

mechanics, electronics, history and geography. Mr Winter had always encouraged her to educate herself rather than go to university. He was a self-taught man and valued self-education above that of an institutional one. He had always encouraged China to learn all she could from books rather than becoming entirely dependent upon computers.

Being half-human and half-bionic had its advantages, especially when it came to acquiring new knowledge. The part of China that her grandfather had fashioned with an electronic circuit board to save her life – the part of her which had evolved into an electronic soul – was somewhat like a hard drive of a computer and aided her in storing large quantities of data and information in super-quick time. China seemed to retain every morsel of knowledge she read. It was so much more powerful than having a photographic memory and allowed her to learn so much in such a little amount of time.

Saturday afternoons were China's favourite time of the whole week, when she abandoned her studies to unwind. In her free time, she liked to experiment a little and attempt to invent new models of robots. This was a project that she enjoyed working on by herself, without her grandfather's help.

One Saturday afternoon, China decided to go into the city centre in search of some supplies, which she needed for her next great invention. She had been working on making a mechanical baby robot. There were so many adult-sized robots on the market, so she figured that it would be a novelty to create a Baby Bot. All she needed to finish her project was a couple of circuit boards, copper and brass fittings, and a handful of gears. She could have teleported herself to the store and back, but she preferred to go for a walk whenever the opportunity arose. She liked the fresh air and always tried to get as much exercise as possible. Besides, by walking to the store, she could further explore the city and get to meet new people.

China certainly got to meet new people that afternoon. She often found that some individuals had the most intriguing person-

alities and were as fascinating to her as historical buildings and antique books. All manner of folk were out strolling about the streets that afternoon. People from all walks of life and all kinds of ethnic backgrounds made their way through the winding side streets, along the footpaths and market stalls. She strolled through a large market crammed with the most unusual antique wares.

Consumers seemed to be fascinated by objects and artefacts from the past. The world had become so modern and ultra-efficient that there was simply no longer any need for old-fashioned gadgets, ornaments or appliances. No one had the necessity for telephones, books, computers, televisions, radios, bicycles or decorative furniture in the modern world. These kinds of articles had become obsolete. They had disappeared from everyday life and usually wound up in antique shops, auctions or flea markets, appreciated only by those who had an eye for the beauty of the past. Of course, those who profited most from this type of trade were time travellers who were lucky enough to acquire such treasures, managing to return to their present timeline unharmed. It was a mixture of luck and sheer guts that some enterprising time travellers ever made it back at all. Time travel was a very dodgy business these days and practising as a time-travelling antique dealer was an even dodgier business.

China was in no hurry, so she stopped at a flea market along the way to browse the unusual treasures from yesteryear. An antique television set had caught her eye. The large black box with a shiny glass surface and a small panel of buttons to the side looked as if it weighed a ton. China had only ever seen television sets in holographic images and although she had never seen one up close before, she knew exactly what she was looking at. This was the real deal.

"That's a nineteen eighty-five model," piped up a voice from behind the stall. "So, it's a little more expensive than the twenty-fourty model beside it."

China looked in the direction that the voice was coming from and saw a young lady about her own age smiling warmly at her. She

was a plain-looking girl with long, red hair tied in two plaits, one either side of her face. Her nose and tongue were pierced and she had the tiniest tattoo of a butterfly on her left cheek under her eye. China smiled back and explained that she was simply window shopping and that her grandfather also traded in antiques. The lady took China's hand and shook it. She introduced herself as Jodie and welcomed China to the city of Liverpool. China felt immediately at ease with Jodie and began to strike up a conversation about the antique trade. The two young ladies stood and chatted for well over half an hour. By the time China was ready to move on, she had invited her new friend to drop by the workshop the following Saturday for afternoon tea, when Jodie would have a day off.

As China walked away from the stall and looked back at Jodie, she noticed that she was wearing a full-length, gothic, black dress with a red belt around her waist and large, unladylike, Doc Marten boots. China admired her unique sense of style.

As the evening wore on, China seemed to have been walking an awfully long time before she came across the store that she was looking for. After she had purchased her wares, she noted that it was beginning to get dull and she began to pick up her pace through the streets. There were no telepods in sight, so she had no choice but to walk home. Aware that she would have to cut through Bold Street to make her way home, she wondered if she would get across it before the curfew began. She was sure that she would make it back to Bold Street on time and indeed she would have if she hadn't taken a wrong turn along the way. One wrong turn was all it took to get herself completely lost and waste another hour of her time trying to find her way back. She had stopped several strangers to ask for directions along the way, but everyone she seemed to meet was also lost or from out of town.

She knew that she must have been nearing the outskirts of Bold Street when she saw people dashing past her in the opposite direction, hurrying along to get off the streets as quickly as possible. Aware that the curfew also applied to the side streets that

surrounded Bold Street, China started to make a run for it. Once she passed a familiar old church, she found her bearings again. She came to the top of Bold Street and despite the darkness of the night closing in around her, she could see from the street lights that it was completely empty the whole way down. Not a single being was in sight. She had no choice but to march right through the street to get herself home and so she kept her wits about her, on the lookout for the humanoid robots that guarded the streets after dark. She wasn't sure which prospect was more daunting: being arrested and fined for breaking the curfew or slipping back in time and becoming trapped on the other side.

Her panting and gasping breath would surely have been heard for miles. The louder she panted, the harder she ran. Her mechanical heart was beginning to race a little and rattled about as she ran. She couldn't believe her luck when she made it to the end of Bold Street and stood a while to catch her breath. She would have to keep moving to get off the side street where she stood, but she paused for a moment to look back and take in her small triumph.

Standing next to a quaint tearoom, she pondered whether the reports of a time slip were true at all. She doubted that they were true. The thought that she had better move on and avoid getting caught breaking the law had just entered her pretty little head when she jumped back in shock at the sound of hundreds of screaming voices. The screams seemed to come from everywhere at once and yet at the same time it was difficult to pinpoint exactly where they were coming from. Hiding in the doorway of the tearoom, China's eyes frantically searched all around her for the source of the sounds. There was no one in sight. Not a single soul and yet the screaming grew louder and closer. All of a sudden, a bombardment of large stones came hurtling in the direction of the building where she was huddled. The stones seemed to appear out of thin air and land all about the roadside. Laughter could suddenly be heard above the barbaric screams as well as what sounded like the distinct sound of soldiers marching. As soon as China could make out the sound of marching, she saw the faint outline of a row

of what seemed to be Roman soldiers, marching on foot directly through the middle of Bold Street. There were at least fifty of them in neat rows, marching along the road, calling and crying out as if giving a warning to anyone who should hear them. They were almost solid in appearance, yet China could see through them ever so slightly. What really caught her eye and gave her serious cause for alarm was the fact that their feet were not visible above ground level. They were literally marching through the road.

Within the next few moments, the sounds faded and the phantom army started to slowly fade away, leaving behind the empty, eerie street, which China had been familiar with.

As soon as the spectacle had ended, China fled the scene and got herself back to safety in double quick time. Even though she knew that her grandfather would be angry, she felt compelled to tell him what had happened. He listened intensely to her incredible story and waited until she had finished before giving her a lecture on the dangers of loitering near Bold Street at night. Although China was shaken by the strange encounter, there was a small part of her that couldn't help but become intrigued by it.

As the days rolled by, China threw herself into her work. Eventually, however, she found herself thinking about the strange incident a lot and had even started to become somewhat distracted by it.

The following Saturday, China experienced her second strange encounter with Bold Street. Jodie, the lady from the antique stall at the flea market, stopped by the workshop to have afternoon tea with China. The pair got along like two old school chums and were striking up a friendship quite quickly.

Jodie was studying to become a doctor and spent most of her time going between the university and the city hospital. She helped occasionally on the market stall at weekends, whenever her father was away on business. Jodie shared many of China's interests; she had a passion for reading old history books and found the whole concept of time travel to be a rather fascinating subject. It was when they had struck up a conversation about time travel that

China related the story of what had happened to her the previous Saturday night on Bold Street. Jodie was enthralled and utterly mesmerised by China's account.

There was no other course of action except for the two brave young souls to take it upon themselves to investigate the street later that night. Jodie had planned to go home before the curfew started, but instead decided to stay on at the workshop until after dark. China would tell her grandfather that she was walking Jodie to their local telepod so she could be teleported home to safety rather than having to walk. There was a telepod located near the workshop, so they wouldn't have to venture near Bold Street or any of its side streets. Of course, as soon as they got to the telepod, they walked straight past it in the direction of Bold Street. The curfew had already started an hour ago and they knew that they were coming close to the street when they heard a whistle blowing and the distinct robotic voice of a humanoid security man instructing a passer-by to move away from the area. They hid behind a public bench on a side street, watching the humanoid cycling past. Jodie had commented that it was such a novelty to see a bicycle in this day and age!

When the bulky figure on the bicycle had made its way off Bold Street and up a side alley, the two ladies sat on the bench, almost overwhelmed with anticipation, where they waited for what seemed like an hour. They had been too busy chatting and passing the time away to notice that a man in a brown, leather coat had emerged from a doorway behind them and was approaching their bench. Jodie stopped talking and grabbed hold of China's arm tightly as her eyes locked on the shape of the tall man walking towards them. He greeted them with a, "Goodnight," and walked right passed them, turning the corner onto the main stretch of Bold Street. Jodie was relieved to realise that he was just a passer-by, minding his own business and breaking the curfew just the same as they were.

What happened within the next few moments was so incredible that the two girls couldn't utter a word to one another, but

instead stared straight ahead in disbelief. It started with a bright light emerging in the centre of the sky above Bold Street. The light began to spread out at a rapid rate, covering most of the area. White fluffy clouds began to emerge against a turquoise-blue sky. Birds could be heard and seen chirping and flapping across the bright summer scene directly above Bold Street, yet the distant portion of sky that surrounded the emerging daylight was still as black as tar. The stars and the moon still illuminated the darkness of the night sky surrounding the summer's day, which had temporarily popped into existence. It was a beautiful, spellbinding sight. It was so breath-taking that neither Jodie nor China had the inclination to feel afraid.

The man with the brown, leather coat stood still in the middle of the street, straining his neck back to look up at the heavens above him. He was completely captivated by it all. Then other sounds began to emerge, such as mumbled voices and muffled noises, which sounded alarmingly like shotgun fire. The unmistakable roar of a canon fired at close range could be heard ripping through the atmosphere. The man in the brown, leather coat crouched down in terror. Jodie squeezed China's arm.

The buildings around Bold Street began to disappear and became replaced with rolling green hills and valleys, which were interspersed here and there by muddy banks. Confused by the fact that he had found himself standing in grass, the man looked all about him in a baffled manner. Jodie and China watched as, much to their sheer disbelief, a battalion of soldiers, dressed in a uniform resembling something from the Napoleonic War, stood pompously at the top of a distant hill. The gunshots and cannon fire continued, just as a soldier from the same period galloped forth on a horse with his sword drawn in the direction of the man. As the horse drew nearer, the soldier could be clearly seen. He was a grey-haired man in his late forties with a long ponytail hanging to the back of a leather, tricorne hat. The stubble on his face was at least two days old. He wore a dark blue coat with a white cross-belt criss-crossing his chest, a white undercoat, and skin-tight white

trousers tucked into a pair of long black riding boots. The soldier swiftly swooped down towards the man and dragged him up onto the horse. The horse galloped on towards the hills and the entire scene faded as quickly as it had appeared. In seconds, it was completely gone. Bold Street was converted back to its former glory as the daylight faded into the night sky. There was no sign of the man in the brown, leather coat. He had been taken.

China had felt very guilty about not reporting the matter to the police. She had to pass the man's missing poster every other day on the way into the city centre when she was on errands, but she and Jodie had made a pact not to tell anyone what they had witnessed, especially not the police, for fear of the consequences of breaking the curfew. One thing was for sure; she would certainly not dare tell her grandfather what she had done.

The events that took place that night on Bold Street continued to haunt China's mind for a long time. Neglecting her engineering studies, she spent a great deal of time researching the concept of time slips. What she discovered through her research had surprised her. There were a large number of areas worldwide that had been reported to have displayed all the hallmarks of a time-slip zone. There were at least a dozen such locations spread throughout the Americas. She began to wonder if it was likely that her brother had met such a fate, as he had disappeared without a trace. Several years of investigations had led to the same conclusion: he appeared to have fallen off the face of the earth.

It wasn't a subject that China spoke openly about to her grandfather, as she knew that he blamed himself for her brother's disappearance. China was aware of her grandfather's reasons for shying away from the topic. Mr Winter had suspected for some time that his grandson had disobeyed him and gone time travelling without his permission. Maddox was such a headstrong character. He had wanted to explore the world in all its diversity throughout the ages via time travel. His one great dream in life was to become an explorer; however, his grandfather saw Maddox as more of a dreamer.

Maddox was only eighteen years old when he first hinted that he wished to set off on his travels to experience other times and places. Mr Winter didn't believe that Maddox was mature enough to set off exploring, especially if he intended to discover the world through time travel. Mr Winter only ever wanted what was best for Maddox and having noticed his entrepreneurial abilities from an early age, he truly believed that his grandson had the potential to take over the family business someday. Maddox strongly disagreed.

It was a real struggle for China not to inform her grandfather of the abduction she had witnessed on Bold Street or to bring up her brother's disappearance for discussion. It bothered her conscience to keep anything from her grandfather, but she felt that it wasn't the time or the place to burden him with such matters.

Apart from the demands of his busy workload, Mr Winter's mind was becoming increasingly occupied with the progress of the war. It seemed as if the war was never going to end and it was beginning to affect daily life around the globe more than ever. All types of metals had risen in price as demand was high and supply was low, making it increasingly difficult to source valuable materials for the workshop. Tools and hardware equipment were being shipped off for the war effort. There was even talk of food and beverages being rationed.

Mr Winter was strongly against the war, believing it to be a pointless cause. The war had seemingly started because of the invention of time travel. People believed that the major time travel companies and corporations were fighting for the right to keep their Time Gates and Worm Holes open to the public for business. Governments across the globe, however, were pushing to privatise the whole system and place a ban on public time travel, reserving it for military purposes only.

It seemed that propaganda endeavoured to make citizens believe that it was their duty to fight for the times in which they lived, to take up arms against the deadliest of all foes – time itself.

*THIS WAS A WAR AGAINST TIME. NOW WAS THE TIME
FOR WAR.*

The truth was that no one knew exactly how or when the war had started or what it was truly about. Volunteers still went to the frontlines in their hundreds of thousands, ready and willing to die for their cause. The numbers of those reported to have been killed in action or missing in action accounted for every last soul that had volunteered.

Governments around the world were now pushing for conscription. It had been introduced in most countries, including the Americas in recent weeks, since the Winters had moved to England. The threat of conscription was looming over Mr Winter's mind like a dark, murky cloud waiting to burst. He wasn't sure how he would cope with losing China as well as Maddox. No one had ever returned home from the war.

Communications between the home front and the war front ranged from poor to non-existent at times. Very little real information was ever received by relatives. Not much was known about the progress of the war except that it was bloody and never ending.

Mr Winter had no real allegiance to either side of the conflict. He didn't support the governments in their bid to militarise time travel nor did he approve of the existence of time travel corporations who defied the natural laws of physics and encouraged citizens to blatantly interfere with their past or future. He understood that life was meant to be experienced on a moment-to-moment basis. People were supposed to live in the present moment and accept their past as much as they should accept their fate. He strongly believed that every experience in life was simply meant to be and should never be altered in any way. He had always maintained that everything was allocated a correct place in time and that is the way it should remain. Too many people had fallen from the face of the earth because of time slips. Most of these unfortunate souls would never return home and all because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.



CHAPTER 3

A HAPPY MEDIUM



It was a quiet Monday morning in the workshop. There was a lull in antique repairs and Mr Winter was killing time, polishing the shelves in the large toy department of the antique store on the first storey. The lack of customers loitering about made it an opportune moment for staff to re-stock the shelves. It warmed Mr Winter's heart to see the hustle and bustle of hundreds of mechanical staff, working with precision, running about like clockwork. China was taking a break, her nose stuck in another dusty, tarnished-looking history book. The faint sound of a woman's voice calling out from the street below had caught China's attention and caused her to clasp her book shut while making for her bedroom window.

A woman dressed from head to toe in white robes was standing on a six-foot wall, holding a piece of literature in one hand and flapping both her arms about passionately, bellowing out something about 'voluntary recruitment' and 'joining the war effort'. China opened the window to hear the woman's shouts more clearly. A crowd of people were beginning to gather around her to hear what she had to say. There were at least fifty people standing at the foot of the wall and hords more were crossing over from

both sides of the street to hear the demonstration. A small boy of about seven years was handing out flyers to the crowd. China was amused by what she saw; holding a public demonstration of this calibre and handing out paper flyers was such an old-fashioned means of attempting to drum up support for any cause. It reminded her of the kinds of public demonstrations that were held centuries before during the early 1900s, when women were fighting for the vote. The woman standing on the wall even looked like one of the suffragettes that she had read about in a history book. China presumed that it must have been easier to get a message out in the open through such old-fashioned methods as paper flyers and public lectures than relying on holographic texts and images. It was impossible to spread political beliefs and propaganda through holographic mail these days as governments tended to intercept all forms of mail, censoring and shutting down services within seconds.

This particular campaign had been organised on behalf of the United Citizens Army, a global movement dedicated to the freedom of time travel for all citizens. It was clear from what the woman had been telling the crowd that conscription was very soon to be introduced in England. She went on to explain that men and women who were conscripted had the right to choose which side of the war they were fighting for. They had as much right to choose as those who volunteered. The governments of the world were united in their cause to privatise time travel, which resulted in armies from all nations merging together to form one united global army: the International Armed Forces. Although it paid families better to join the International Armed Forces, this demonstration urged citizens to protect their democratic rights and fight for the freedom to time travel by joining the United Citizens Army. Governments around the world were increasingly finding that even though the salary from the United Citizens Army paid less, more and more citizens tended to join it, feeling more passionately about the cause.

When she had heard enough of the sermon, China closed her

bedroom window. She sat on the edge of her bed, hugging a pillow tight to her chest, as she tried to imagine what life as a soldier would be like. She shuddered at the thought of it. It wouldn't suit her to fight in combat. Perhaps she could join up as a mechanic or engineer, she thought.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. Her mind was tired from thinking about her demise. She tried distracting herself with her work, but she found that she couldn't focus. Her thoughts kept wandering back to the war and what it would mean for her grandfather, who would be left behind.

China returned to the store when she had finished her break. There were no customers or deliveries expected. As the store was quiet, Mr. Winter decided to give her the rest of the morning off. This was a rare and unexpected novelty for her, an opportunity that she certainly didn't waste. Her time was spent wisely, adding the finishing touches to her latest creation – the Baby Bot. The toolbox that she needed for the job was stored away in the warehouse on the fourth storey. Not wanting to lug it up the stairs to the main workshop, she decided to stay in the warehouse to complete her work. The warehouse was a spacious area, which served as both a storage facility and a makeshift laboratory. She sat down on a workbench and spread out the tools and equipment that she needed to finish the job on the large metal worktop in front of her. All that was required was a wrench, a screwdriver, a soldering iron, some nuts, bolts and brass fittings. She tugged her protective goggles down over her face, which made her look a little like a mad scientist at work. The pungent smell of burning wafted about the warehouse as she soldered two wires together, joining the main circuit board to the central processing unit, which stored all of the robot's software. Having finished that task, she simply had to tighten a few nuts and bolts here and there and then she was finished. The result was one freaky, half-crazed-looking Baby Bot. It was nothing like a human baby; it wasn't designed to mimic the humanoid robots, which strongly resembled humans, giving most people the creeps. This robot resembled the good old-fash-

ioned robots that were simply fit for their purpose and made to look like they had been knocked together out of various bits and pieces of metal and wood. This Baby Bot had a face like a bag of spanners! It was ugly as sin with a brass doorknob for a nose and two red light bulbs for eyes. It had a revolting expression on its face and a mouth full of rusty nails for teeth. It stood sixty-centimetres tall and waddled from side to side when it walked, just like babies do, as if it were unsteady on its feet. China had added some finishing touches in a bid to soften its features and make it look more baby like. She placed a large, pink bow to the side of the thing's head and covered its rear end in a cloth nappy. Despite such a cute effort, it still looked as if it had been battered with an ugly stick.

Even though her first prototype was as hideous-looking as hell, it was well programmed to carry out numerous useful tasks. It responded to voice commands and was capable of understanding over thirty different languages. It could record and replay any form of information: visual, verbal or written. It could fetch and carry items up to ten times its own weight, solve complex calculations and, best of all, it could teach human toddlers how to speak and count. It was designed with parents in mind and its main purpose was to educate young children. Satisfied that she had achieved her goal, China set about contacting the Patent Office to secure a patent for her latest invention. She was looking forward to receiving feedback about her new product from her grandfather. Mr Winter constantly encouraged her to stretch her imagination to its limits and continue working on her ideas. She was sure that he would be delighted with her latest project and hoped that he liked it enough to mass-produce it and promote it in their store.

Working on the Baby Bot that morning was just the tonic that China had needed to take her mind off the war. Keeping herself busy was the only way to quash her weary thoughts and so she kept herself occupied for the rest of the day by ploughing over the business accounts. Such drudgery was a necessity and although she found it to be the most tedious of chores, it helped her to forget

about the fact that her life as she knew it was about to come to a standstill. Being called up to war was inevitable and she would have to face the reality of it sooner rather than later. Conscription was now a certainty and so it was time that China made up her mind and picked a side to fight for.

She discussed the matter later that evening with her grandfather over a comforting bowl of ice cream. Mr Winter was devastated by the prospect of sending his granddaughter off to fight a meaningless war. The fact that citizens could pick a side to fight for after being conscripted made him very suspicious of the War Office. It was of no concern to the War Office which army a citizen chose to join, as long as they signed up to fight. It was the main objective of the War Office to promote the war irrespective of which side citizens chose to fight for. Many people believed that the War Office was profiting from the war and therefore deliberately prolonging it, causing the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands of young men and women. Some blamed their governments, while others believed in a conspiracy involving a joint pact between governments and time travel corporations to generate a fake war from which they could all profit. This didn't stop the majority of citizens across the world from volunteering and laying down their lives for either cause. Some believed strongly in their cause, while others were in it for money or glory. The one thing that China felt strongly about was that there was more honour in volunteering than having to be conscripted.

Mr Winter had decided that he would risk his entire livelihood to protect his granddaughter. He didn't fear the consequences of breaking the law, by putting China in hiding. It was the only option that he could accept and so he discussed his plan openly with her in detail as the evening wore on. He would go as far as faking her death and hiding her in a safe house run by mercenaries in the African planes. He had been researching a place of sanctuary for months and it was just a matter of when China would be prepared to go into hiding. Mr Winter wasn't at all amused to hear that she wasn't so keen on the idea. It seemed to China to be a

rather cowardly thing to do when so many brave souls were taking up arms. Although she had agreed to sleep on the matter, she knew deep down that going into hiding wasn't an option for her.

The next day, China had agreed to meet Jodie for lunch. Jodie had a long break in between lectures and intended to treat herself to a nice bite to eat at a café near the university. China was the first to arrive at the café and stood up to greet her friend with a hug when she turned up. Jodie was aware that China wasn't quite her bubbly self as she stared at the food on her plate, tossing it about with her fork rather than eating it. Jodie pried a little before China began to open up about her thoughts on the war and the threat of conscription, which hung in the air like a bad smell. Jodie informed China that she intended to volunteer as a student doctor with the Red Cross. She would be leaving for the frontline within the next week and she had been wondering if China would be interested in joining the Red Cross as a trainee nurse. She explained that they were currently recruiting and that no experience was necessary. All recruits were to be trained on the job. Jodie, just like China, hadn't yet decided which side of the war was actually worth fighting for and so she thought that volunteering was an excellent means of doing one's duty for the war effort while remaining neutral. Both Jodie and China felt that even though citizens should be entitled to travel freely, the whole concept of time travel was being abused by the careless management of corporations. People were going missing, interfering too much with the past and becoming lost in time and space. Time travel corporations were still not getting it right and there was a great need for an official body to govern and regulate the system. On the other hand, giving way to total government control and having a strict ban imposed on all citizens who wished to time travel was a democratic outrage. A happy medium was needed. Either way, the two friends agreed that neither side of the argument was worth dying for.

China left her friend feeling even more confused than she had before meeting up with her. She promised Jodie that she would

think about her proposal and give her an answer within the next few days. China looked around at the gothic-looking buildings, the tall sky scrapers, the shops, cafés and bushy trees that lined the pavements. She then took her gaze up to the skies, observing the airships, floating hotels, business premises and people flying to and fro by jetpack. She sighed deeply and loudly as she thought about how everything in her world was about to change.

Mr Winter had settled down on the sofa by the fireside with a brandy later that evening. He seldom took a drink before bedtime, but made exceptions when his thoughts were in turmoil and he needed something extra to help him get to sleep. The last few weeks had brought him sleepless nights, fretting for his granddaughter's future. He sipped on his brandy while working on some sketches for a new toy he was creating. He put down his sketchpad and pencil as soon as China walked into the room. Feeling that it was time for a chat, she made herself cosy on the chair nearest the fireside. Time was ticking along and they both needed to come to an agreement as to what arrangement would be best for them both.

China had given the issue considerable thought. She wouldn't be happy to simply abandon her grandfather at this stage in his life. She had decided that the war could wait. The War Office could only conscript her if they managed to find her.

Going into hiding wasn't the easiest of decisions for China. Deep down she considered herself to be a coward, which made her feel very unhappy. The fact was, though, that she felt trapped in a catch 22 situation. She had intended to do the honourable thing and volunteer, but she also wanted to be there for her grandfather if he needed her. Besides, she could still do valuable work for him while she was in hiding and return as soon as the whole conflict blew over. If she was honest with herself, she suspected that she would more than likely never return from the war.

Mr Winter's face lit up like a torch when China informed him of her decision to go into hiding. He reassured her that it was the right thing to do. He intended to make a few more enquires first

thing the next morning and set the final arrangements in motion. China's suitcase was to be packed and ready by the end of the week. There was no time to waste.

They both retired to bed early that night. China tossed and turned the whole night through while Mr Winter slept like a log. He was sure the next morning that his good night's sleep was due to China's decision, rather than the brandy he had before bedtime. Little did the two of them know that they would be changing their minds about China's plans that very afternoon.



IT WAS a busy day in the store as usual. There were numerous deliveries and parcels arriving, the store was full of customers the whole morning through and Mr Winter had a number of antique repairs to finish before afternoon. China held the fort, serving customers and placing orders. Things didn't begin to simmer down until later in the evening. The store was empty for the first time that day and the sky outside began to grow dull with dirty-coloured clouds. Suddenly, a bolt of fork lightning lit up the entire store and the rain began to bucket down. A gust of wind started to blow the curtains by the windows up into the air like dancing ghosts. Just as China was closing the windows, the front door of the store slowly opened and an old woman, dressed in long, flowing, dark robes with swirling floral patterns and peacock feather designs, made her way carefully through the door. She was wearing a green, lace scarf around her neck and rose-tinted glasses. Her hair was long and grey, but neatly tied up in a bun to one side, under her black, feathered fascinator. She was a singular-looking character and immediately brought to mind a hippy type who liked to dabble in the dark arts and drink herbal tea, while spending her days meditating on a large rock in a forest.

China couldn't help but stare at the woman as she stood gawking at the marvellous sights that filled every corner of the store. When the peculiar-looking woman was finished gazing about

her surroundings, she turned her face towards China and began to speak in a deep, husky voice.

"I have a message for your grandfather, China."

The woman didn't blink as she spoke. She stared into China's eyes and held her gaze for as long as China could hold hers. Eventually, China had to blink, but she couldn't bring herself to respond to the woman standing before her. There was something spooky about the woman, but China couldn't quite put her finger on it. She didn't like the fact that she knew nothing about the woman and yet the woman knew her name. China moved slowly backwards towards the hallway to fetch her grandfather, all the while never taking her eyes away from the mysterious visitor. Mr Winter was already making his way through the hall, into the store, and ended up bumping right into China.

"Ah, Mr Winter ... let me introduce myself," announced the stranger before China could get a word out. "My name is Madame Pearl and I am a professional psychic medium," she continued, but was immediately interrupted by Mr Winter, who instructed her to refrain from continuing with her fraudulent spiel. He said that the word 'professional' wasn't a word that he would ever have associated with a psychic medium. China had seldom seen her grandfather's expression grow angry, but this was one of those rare moments when he couldn't contain his distain.

Madame Pearl was clearly unaware of Mr Winter's previous bad experience with a medium who had claimed to have made contact with his deceased wife. The trouble was that no real contact was made. The reading was a hoax and the medium was later proved to be a con woman. It made Mr Winter's blood boil to think that a person could manipulate a vulnerable, grieving spouse just to con them out of money. He really believed that such people had the blackest of hearts.

"I have a message from your grandson, Maddox," declared Madame Pearl. "You need to hear me out, Mr Winter."

China spoke up at last. "If you're looking to con us out of money, you're wasting your time."

"I'm not here for your money," responded Madame Pearl. "I am just happy to be able to pass on a message from your brother."

China was visibly annoyed with the psychic and her voice rose as she yelled, "You're going to have to leave right now, lady."

Just as China walked towards the front door of the store to open it, Madame Pearl held out her right hand to Mr Winter. Her fist was clenched. She turned her hand round and opened it. Mr Winter could hardly believe what he was seeing. She was holding a golden compass, which Mr Winter recognised immediately. It was the compass that he had given to Maddox on his eighteenth birthday, just a few months before he went missing. Mr Winter's expression grew even more distressed when he realised that the glass of the compass was cracked. It looked as if it had been through the wars.

"Maddox has been trying to make contact with you for some time now, Mr Winter," Madame Pearl began to say. "He wants you to know that he didn't run away from home, but was taken against his will."

All China could do was stare in disbelief. Mr Winter was shaking his head from side to side, still staring down at the compass in Madame Pearl's hand.

"Maddox also wants you to know that he never disobeyed you. He would never have gone against your wishes, no matter how much he wanted to explore the world."

Madame Pearl approached Mr Winter and placed the broken compass in the palm of his hands. Mr Winter remained silent as his eyes began to well up. The message that the mystical-looking woman had just relayed to him was enough evidence for Mr Winter to accept that his grandson had made some form of contact with her. They were the comforting words that he had needed to hear for so long, that Maddox didn't run away from home and he didn't disobey him by time travelling without his permission.

"Maddox says that he will have no further use for the compass now. It cannot help him where he is," Madame Pearl stated bluntly.

Mr Winter grabbed Madame Pearl by the wrist and looked into her eyes. He couldn't focus his eyes on her, for the tears that were blurring his vision. He blinked hard and the tears began to spill down his cheeks.

"You have to tell me who took him," he demanded. "Where was he taken to? What happened to him?" Mr Winter began to tremble as he spoke, prompting China to move closer to him for support.

"I really don't know much more than that," replied Madame Pearl in a soft tone. "The only other information I can give you is that he was fighting in the war when he made contact. I could see him in an army uniform standing before me."

"But what was he doing in a uniform? What do you mean he was fighting in the war? None of this makes sense," exclaimed Mr Winter, his voice beginning to rise with sheer frustration.

"You said he was taken," China added. "How did he end up in the war if he was kidnapped?"

"You really have to give us more information than this," Mr Winter insisted.

Madame Pearl was edging her way towards the front door to escape the questions, which she couldn't answer.

"I wish that I could be of more assistance to you, but I really cannot help you more than this," she explained with a sympathetic air.

"So, we just have to accept that he's dead and never know how or why it happened?" retorted China in a harsh manner.

Mr Winter winced when he heard the word 'dead'.

"I never said Maddox was dead," replied Madame Pearl. "I simply said that he was fighting in the war. Not every soul who makes contact with me is dead," she clarified and with that she made her way out the door, leaving behind two very startled-looking individuals.

"But wait," called Mr Winter as he ran to the door to summon the woman back. But it was too late; she had already boarded the hovercraft that had been docked outside the workshop. The craft

scooted away from the premises at some speed as Mr Winter looked on like a lost child.

China's mind was racing. She knew that she would have to tell her grandfather about the events that she had witnessed on Bold Street in recent weeks. Maybe the latest spate of kidnappings could give them clues about what might have happened to her brother. Maybe her brother really was still alive and if he was fighting in the war, perhaps she could join up to find him.

It took some time for China to coax her grandfather back into the store and convince him to shut up shop for the day. All the orders and repairs were postponed until the following day. They had some rather pressing issues to discuss. China instructed the robots to make tea and bring it into the drawing room where they were not to be disturbed. Cleaning duties and other such house-keeping chores were to be fulfilled by the robots, as they usually were every other day. All further visitors were to be politely turned away for the rest of the afternoon.

The automatons and humanoids carried out their orders like mechanical soldiers while China and her grandfather sat themselves down to talk in the drawing room. Before discussing the peculiar message that they had just received, China felt the urge to clear her conscience. She gulped hard and stared down at the laces of her boots before finally plucking up the courage to tell her grandfather about her first strange encounter with the phantom Roman army on Bold Street. Mr Winter listened intently and allowed her to finish her tale before scolding her on the dangers of breaking the curfew. She then proceeded to tell her grandfather about the night that she had outright lied to him and deliberately broken her curfew, returning to Bold Street in the hope that she would witness another time slip. She divulged her secret shame, which she shared with Jodie, at not having reported the kidnapping that they had witnessed that night.

Again, Mr Winter listened attentively to the story before reprimanding her and when he had finished lecturing his granddaugh-

ter, he paused a while to think about the scene that she had just described.

What China and Jodie had observed that night was a case of time-travel abduction. China had clearly described a group of historical-looking soldiers who had materialised from the past, snatched a person against their will and taken them back in time. This literally added a whole new dimension to crime. It would of course be difficult to prove and virtually impossible to solve, but Mr Winter felt that the right thing to do was to report the incident to the police. He would bring China to the station the next morning to file a report.

China was almost relieved to have confessed to her grandfather and vowed not to disobey him or keep secrets from him again.

As the conversation moved on, it led to the discussion of the psychic's message from Maddox. They both presumed that the message was authentic. Mr Winter reasoned that the woman had absolutely nothing to gain by coming by the store to relay the message. She had received no pay and had asked for nothing in return. Besides, she had the compass to prove it was Maddox who was making contact. Mr Winter had dreamt of Maddox so many times and the one recurring symbol throughout his dreams was the golden compass, which he had given him. This was the sign that he could only have wished for. He was quite certain that Maddox had actually made contact.

Madame Pearl had mentioned that Maddox was taken against his will and yet he was supposedly at war. This didn't make a lot of sense to Mr Winter or his granddaughter. Why did he end up choosing to join the war effort? Why didn't he choose to come home instead? Mr Winter had noticed that, although the glass of the compass was cracked, it still actually worked quite well. This made him wonder what the psychic meant when she said that the compass was of no use to Maddox where he was. Another startling fact was that Maddox was apparently still alive, yet his only means of contact with his family was through a psychic medium.

It was a hell of a long night for the pair as they thrashed out

the events of the day and struggled to come up with any real answers. The burning question on China's mind was going to have to be asked. She sat up straight and looked sternly at her grandfather before posing her question:

"Should we change our minds about my going into hiding, grandfather? Should I join up and look for Maddox instead?"

Mr Winter was instantaneous with his reply.

"No, China. I will not lose the two of you to the war."

China wasn't pleased with his reply and pressed on with her argument. She reasoned that the only real chance of Maddox ever being found was if she were to go and look for him. He had contacted them, which indicated to her that he wished to be found. She suggested that he was probably taken against his will to a prisoner of war camp. She could make enquiries when she got to the front and inform her grandfather of any news. Maybe she could even start a campaign for his release.

Mr Winter wasn't convinced by China's flimsy plan. It was too much of a risk and yet he felt utterly useless to stand by and do nothing when it had been confirmed that his grandson was still alive. He would prefer to make enquires at the War Office first. China was quick to point out that it was a complete stranger who had just broken the news of Maddox's involvement in the war. The War Office had made no contact whatsoever with Mr Winter regarding his grandson. What chance would they possibly have of gaining any kind of assistance from the War Office?

Every aspect of the war was an utter mystery to civilians around the world. The war effort was strictly censored and every decision was deemed to be highly classified. Soldiers had no idea where exactly they were being posted to and not one single being seemed to know where the frontline was located. It was a mystery as to what country or continent the war was taking place.

China continued to work on her grandfather in her gentle yet persuasive way. Her grandfather eventually succumbed to the idea that it was better to join the war effort as a Red Cross volunteer rather than doing duty as a soldier. One thing was certain; if she

was found in hiding and finally conscripted, she would have no choice but to serve her time in the army rather than the Red Cross. It would be a much wiser decision to volunteer with the Red Cross while she still had the chance, rather than being forced into military service at a later stage. This was the argument that finally swayed her grandfather into accepting the fact that she had to volunteer.

Mr Winter was more relieved to think of China doing her duty as a nurse, rather than as a soldier. The Red Cross seemed to be a safe bet. He also realised that this was probably the only chance they would ever have of trying to find Maddox.



THE NEXT MORNING was a busy one for China. Being behind on orders and repairs, work began at six o'clock. Two digital house-keeping automatons had been ordered by a customer the day before and were scheduled for delivery that very afternoon. They were similar to the automatons that Mr Winter had in his own home to deal with tedious daily chores, like washing, cleaning and preparing food. It was generally thought that the food prepared by robots sometimes excelled that which was prepared by the most prestigious chefs. In fact, most restaurants had started to use automatons to prepare and serve their food.

While Mr Winter worked on the automatons, China was busy repairing antiques. She had to do her repairs in between serving the customers and checking in parcels and deliveries, which were cluttering up the stockroom.

It was twelve noon by the time China managed to get away from the workshop. She had so much to do during her lunch break that she decided to teleport herself to the local police station rather than walk. She really couldn't waste any time today, as she also intended to meet up with Jodie and tell her about her decision to join the Red Cross.

Every telepod looked the same. They were all built to resemble

the shape of a cylinder with a large glass window to the front, and they were all red in colour. It was unusual to see queues around the pods, as people were in and out of them in seconds. There were two types: a single pod for passengers travelling alone with little or no luggage and a communal pod for multiple passengers with luggage or large amounts of cargo. With no seating inside the pod, all passengers were required to stand upright. There were no buttons to press or leavers to pull. One simply stood in the pod and called out the desired destination. It took only a matter of seconds to be transported from one pod to another.

The system, which was based on quantum physics, allowed for the safe transportation of people, goods and luggage by beaming particles through a quantum crystal vacuum. The process was instantaneous and completely safe. It made some people's skin tingle slightly, but there were usually no lasting side effects.

There were thousands of telepods located throughout the country in all types of locations, from street corners to hotels, hospitals and universities. Although it was a most excellent means of transport and could be used for long-distance journeys, people tended to use it more for getting about within their own locality, as it generated large volumes of radiation over long distances. Jetpacks, hovercrafts and airships were still popular modes of transport for longer journeys.

Standing in the telepod, China closed her eyes as she called out her desired destination and waited to be beamed to the far side of the city. She always closed her eyes for that part of the process as she wasn't keen to watch the scenery before her disintegrate into billions of little pixels, before rearranging into a completely different landscape. It always made her feel slightly dizzy and woozy.

Transportation was instantaneous and she seemed to arrive before she had even departed. She opened her eyes to realise that she was standing in a telepod outside the gates of the city police station.

It came as no surprise to China to be greeted by an automaton

in place of a human receptionist. The automaton recorded her details before leading her down a long, brightly lit corridor with white walls, covered with hideous, modern-looking paintings. It made China laugh to think of how foolish people could be to buy a canvas that someone had carelessly tossed a few pots of paint onto. Some of the paintings gave the impression that the paint had actually spilled over onto the canvas. All the modern art that adorned the walls caused the corridor to look like the scene of a bad accident and she wondered if she ought to report this accident to the police while she was there!

The automaton came to an abrupt stop at the second last door along the corridor. It knocked on the door before entering the room and announced China's details to the sergeant sitting at the desk, before moving aside, allowing her to enter.

China's mouth was dry and she felt as if she were starting to hyperventilate a little. The harder the sergeant stared at her, the more nervous she became.

As he stood up to greet her, she couldn't help but notice how obese the man was. Her eye was drawn to the buttons of his shirt, which were struggling to keep his large belly covered. A small patch of dark, wiry hair protruded from his shirt, where his belly was exposed. China gulped hard before sitting down. She wasn't sure what the Sergeant's reaction would be when she revealed that she had broken the curfew.

The beast of a man sat back in his squeaky chair as China began to speak. The more she spoke, the harder the sergeant stared at her. She began to wonder if he was listening to her at all, or if he was perhaps hungry and planning his next meal in his mind.

Eventually, China came to the end of her statement and the Sergeant sat forward in his chair. He spoke in an unusually high-pitched voice, which didn't seem to suit his bulky build. He sounded as if he had been sucking on a helium cylinder.

"Although we are grateful, Miss Winter, that you have come forward as a witness to this abduction case, the fact remains that

you have clearly broken the law. Breaking a curfew is deemed to be a crime."

China had been waiting for a good dressing down for her so-called criminal act. She stared down at the hair on the sergeant's belly, trying its best to escape from his shirt.

"However," the sergeant continued, "on this occasion I am willing to overlook the incident and caution you with a warning." He smiled at China for the first time since she had entered the room. His smile seemed as insincere as his teeth were yellow. He continued to smile at her for longer than she felt comfortable and she began to imagine that he was picturing her lying in a bed of lettuce, in between a chicken sandwich. She was so relieved not to be punished for breaking the curfew that she stood up and asked the sergeant if she was free to go. The sergeant nodded and gestured towards the door with his arm. As she was closing the door behind her, she glanced back at the man and noticed that he had a hand resting in the open drawer of his desk, waiting for her to leave. Whatever he was waiting to take out of the drawer, she was sure that it was edible.

The sun was beginning to peek out from behind the clouds as China was leaving the station. It was a good feeling to have done the right thing by reporting the abduction at last. She didn't mention Jodie's involvement as she didn't want to jeopardise her future career as a doctor. She wasn't sure if breaking a curfew would result in a criminal record, so she thought it best not to mention Jodie's presence that night. Besides, Jodie would have had nothing further to add to the statement. China's version of events would be identical to Jodie's.

The sweet smell of freshly toasted waffles came wafting through the air as China crossed the street and walked past a food stall. This reminded her that she had skipped lunch and she began to feel the pang of hunger rumble through her stomach. She really had no time to stop for food. She had to make it to the city hospital before Jodie was due to start her afternoon shift. She

planned to grab something quick to eat in the hospital cafeteria while she was chatting to Jodie.

The strong scent of disinfectant made China feel a little uneasy as she walked through the hospital corridors on her way to the cafeteria. She wasn't too keen on the smell of hospitals or the sight of blood and so she wondered how on earth she would hack it as a nurse.

Jodie's hair was standing on end as she sprinted up to China's table in the cafeteria. China was already tucking into a plate of pasta as she arrived.

"So, will you be joining the Red Cross with me then?" Jodie quizzed before she even sat down.

"Yes, but it wasn't an easy decision," replied China. "At first my grandfather was dead set against it, but something odd happened in the meantime that helped to change his mind."

China gave Jodie a brief narrative of the previous day's events: the psychic medium's visit to the store; her message of hope from Maddox; and the return of her grandfather's compass. She enlightened Jodie about her intentions to search for her brother and pulled out the locket from under the collar of her dress to show her a photo of him. Jodie couldn't help but notice his very distinct features, his light-blond hair and wide, blue eyes.

Jodie was pleased that her friend was joining up to volunteer with her and she had vowed to do everything in her power to help her find her brother. With such troubled and uncertain times ahead, it was comforting for them to have each other for company.

Glancing at the rather clinical-looking clock hanging next to the side door of the cafeteria, Jodie stood up, hastily pulling her white overcoat over her clothes. She yanked a stethoscope from her duffle bag and swung it around her neck. It was time for her to go on her rounds and so she hurriedly said goodbye to China and scurried out onto the hospital corridor. Before they had parted, China and Jodie agreed to meet at the Red Cross headquarters on James Street the following Saturday morning. Jodie had given

China directions so that she could walk to it, as the nearest telepod was a block away. The headquarters was directly opposite the old White Star Line building: the head office in Liverpool of the company that built the Titanic. This gave China a few days to pack and spend some time with her grandfather before she had to leave.

Jodie had informed China that she ought to pack light. Only a few personal items were all that would be necessary as they would be issued with a uniform and full kit at the main headquarters. They wouldn't need much luggage where they were going.

That night, China went to bed early. She was feeling nostalgic and sat on the edge of her bed watching old images and clips of her parents and her brother on the holographic projector propped up on her dressing table. The projections were so incredibly lifelike that she felt as if her brother and parents were standing in the room in front of her. Several times, she had reached out her hand to touch her parents, but her hand slipped through their image, like a stone being submerged by water. There was nothing there to touch, nothing but air. Unlike a holographic telephone, a projector couldn't allow China to have a conversation with her family. All a projector could do was project old images and clips. The longing she felt to be with her parents and her brother tore at her chest as if she were being clawed by a wild animal. She pined for her family and felt real, physical pain from the loneliness that throbbed inside her.

Feeling upset and leaning forward in the same position for too long was beginning to take its toll on her chest. The stress of her melancholy mood had affected her mechanical heart and she started to feel that her heart was beating irregularly. Every few minutes her heart would feel as if it had stopped or missed a series of beats. This was something that she had grown accustomed to over the years and didn't bother her in the slightest. She knew what she had to do. It was a simple procedure, which she was so used to by now. It didn't even faze her.

She reached for the picture locket around her neck and opened it. To the back of the locket was a hidden compartment, which,

when opened, revealed a windup key like that which is used to wind up a clock. She took the key from the locket with one hand and used the other hand to pull aside her nightdress, exposing a small metal square the colour of her skin, positioned just above her left breast. On closer inspection, the metal square was an actual door that led to her heart. When the door was opened, it exposed several clockwork gears that served as a kind of mechanical pace-maker to keep China's heart beating within her chest. All China had to do when her heart began to flutter was use the key to wind up her mechanical heart. It was a quick and painless procedure. Each time she wound her heart, she considered what a genius her grandfather was and of how he had saved her life.



CHINA TRIED NOT to mope around too much over the next few days. She didn't want to dwell on what the future held for her. It was easier to throw herself into her work and keep her mind occupied with other thoughts. She refrained from discussing her fate with her grandfather before her departure, as they both felt that it would only spoil her last few days.

China had made some arrangements for her grandfather to take on an apprentice while she was away. She had gone to a lot of trouble to find a suitable candidate for the position and had even conducted the interviews herself. Choosing the right person for the job hadn't been as easy or straightforward as she had imagined. Many of the candidates possessed the most impressive qualifications on paper but lacked any real experience. There were plenty of young graduates with engineering degrees and fancy post-graduate diplomas in physics, quantum mechanics and the like. But what Mr Winter needed in his workshop was someone with real, first-hand experience of problem solving.

Not wanting to judge a book by its cover, China interviewed one of the youngest applicants with the least amount of qualifications. He had just turned twenty: the same age as her. Wearing a

beige suit and a white cravat tied around his neck, which suited his sallow complexion, the young man had vast amounts of experience to make up for his lack of qualifications. He was the most enthusiastic of all the candidates and was the only man who didn't overpower the room with cheap aftershave. It was his pleasant manner and kind face that won China over. She was sure that Mr Winter would be impressed by the young man's years of experience, working as a trainee mechanic, for one of the largest and most successful holographic producers in the world. The training the young man had received was world class and certainly stood more to him than a university degree. Young Mr Black was China's final choice for her replacement.

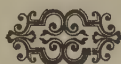
At first, Mr Winter wasn't willing to take on an apprentice. He said that if he couldn't work with his own granddaughter, he would prefer to work alone. He was adamant that he would continue to run the business alone, but China's persuasiveness helped change his mind. After some negotiation, they found a middle ground; Mr Winter agreed to take on an apprentice if China promised two things: firstly, to make contact with him as soon as she arrived at her post and, secondly, to return home the first opportunity she got, whether or not she had found her brother. Of course, China knew too well that the first promise would all depend on her situation. She would try her best to make contact if it were at all possible. It had taken her brother many years to contact her grandfather and so she suspected that it may not be the easiest of tasks to fulfill. As for returning home, Mr Winter knew deep down that he may never see his granddaughter again.

China was just content to know that her grandfather supported her decision to join the war effort. She couldn't bear to leave if they hadn't reached some sort of mutual understanding.



CHAPTER 4

UNTIMELY DEPARTURE



Standing over the large decorative coffin laid out in the workshop, China couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with gloom. It was a beautiful, ornate coffin, the kind that people used to have at funerals over a hundred years ago: a hand-carved, wooden casket with gold and silver embellishments. Coffins of this kind of grandeur were not very common these days. The world had become overpopulated and there simply wasn't enough room to bury all those who passed on. Cremation was the norm and not many people bothered going to the expense of purchasing a classy coffin just to have it cremated. The standard modern coffin was made of thick foam, which was fit for its purpose, highly flammable and, more importantly, cheap as chips. But some people still liked to make a final grand gesture and spend their money on a good old-fashioned replica coffin for their loved ones. It was all a matter of personal taste and depended entirely on one's budget. The thought had struck China that if she died before her time in the war she would have liked to have been laid out in such an elegant coffin as this one.

China was lost in her thoughts and couldn't stop thinking about her grandfather. Her emotions were beginning to get the

better of her, so she forced herself to step back from the coffin and distract herself by continuing to tidy the rest of the shelves in the workshop.

It was the day before her departure for the war and she had already been feeling rather wistful. The coffin that her grandfather had been working on for a customer had side-tracked China's mind from her cleaning duties, causing her to reflect on her impending dilemma. She had made her decision to leave for the front the following day and there was no going back on her decision. As much as she wanted to search for her brother, she was very reluctant to leave her grandfather behind. She would worry for him so much. It wouldn't have bothered her if she had the reassurance that she could easily make contact with him to ensure that he was okay. The uncertainty of ever returning home again was beginning to drive China to despair.

Having finished her cleaning duties for the day, China walked towards the staircase and switched off the light. She paused for a moment and turned to look back over her shoulder at the bulky shape of the coffin lying in the darkly lit room. She once again pondered the fact that it could soon be her lying in a coffin like that. What did she know of war except for what she had read in books? She reckoned that her chances of surviving the war would be very slim.

It was her last evening at home with her grandfather and they had both vowed to make the most of it by having a nice meal and reminiscing about the happier days gone by. It was difficult to hold back the impending sense of doom that China felt swirling within her core, but she managed to put on a brave face and hold it together for her grandfather's sake.

As the night dragged on, their conversation started to come to a lull. They both stared hard at their wine glasses and China got up to divide the remaining contents of the bottle between them. They didn't often drink wine, but this particular night was an occasion to be marked. Mr Winter began to chat about his business plans for the future. He had included China in his plans and

had declared that he intended to sign over the deeds to the workshop to her as soon as she returned home. Although it was a shock to China to hear such a statement, the prospect of inheriting the family business served to distract her mind from all the turmoil that had been building up inside her over the past few days.

Having slugged down the last of his wine, Mr Winter chose to call it a night. China stayed on a while longer and slowly sipped the remains of her wine while mulling over her arrangements for the following morning. She would take her breakfast an hour earlier than usual and say farewell to her grandfather before heading to the telepod on the corner of their street. She planned to post a parcel for her grandfather along the way, which meant that she would have to make a quick detour to the Main Postal Station first.

All packages and parcels for posting needed to be registered and sorted at the city's Main Postal Station. Deliveries of this nature were of course sent via a more sophisticated teleportation service than that which dealt with the transportation of people and luggage. It was only ever on rare occasions that letters were ever posted. Letters had become practically non-existent forms of communication. The modern holographic mailing system had taken over as the most efficient means of communication. All forms of written communication had become virtually obsolete. To write a letter during China's lifetime was as good as carving a message on a rock and firing it up into the air in the hopes that it would eventually land where it should.

Although she tried to force herself to eat breakfast the next morning, China found that she had no appetite. She picked at her food like a child and sipped a few mouthfuls of coffee before gesturing to the servants to clear the table after her. The automations were swift in their movements and did exactly as they were instructed to do. Mr Winter didn't take any breakfast that morning, which differed to his normal routine. China had requested that her grandfather stay put in the workshop and that they would say

goodbye from there. She felt that it would be easier if she left by herself and would make for a more pleasant memory.

She had never witnessed her grandfather crying before until now as he slipped the broken compass, which Maddox had returned to him, into the palm of her hand. He wanted her to keep it, to remind her of him. She couldn't hold back her own tears and after a few moments, she turned away from him to set off on her way. It was one of the most heart-rending moments that she could recall and a major turning point in her life. Her gut instinct was clawing away at her, telling her that she would never again see her grandfather. China was heartbroken, as was her grandfather.

As she made her way to the telepod, she couldn't help but notice the daily toil of life rolling on by all around her, oblivious to her pain. She seemed to notice things in more detail than ever before, as if she were discovering the world for the very first time. Colours were brighter and features were sharper. The buildings and trees seemed more impressive than she had last remembered them to be. She could even smell the leaves on the trees and breathed in their fresh leafy scent as deeply as her lungs would allow. The world appeared to be more beautiful than ever and she wanted to take it all in.

Entering the pod, she looked up to the sky to take one last mental picture with her. The sky was a turquoise blue except for the occasional fluffy cloud. Airships propelled through the air as if floating along the surface of the sea. The early morning jet packers were whizzing by like bumble bees. She spotted one large hovercraft in the distance, before the door of the pod closed. She called out her destination and closed her eyes, as she usually did. Having arrived at her destination in less than a second, she emerged onto the pavement as if she had been part of her new surroundings all along. She blended into the busy scenery and made her way along the winding streets to post her grandfather's parcel.

It wasn't until she had made her way back to James Street, where the Red Cross headquarters was located, that she noticed a haggard old woman sitting on a bench with a small, wooden, fold-

up table propped up in front of her. She looked as if she should have died long ago, but what especially drew China's attention to her was her badly fitted glass eye. It was positively hideous to look at, but seemed to match the whitish grey colour of the other eye, which was almost eaten away by the worst case of a cataract that China had ever seen. Her crinkled, weather-beaten face was visible through long wisps of white hair that hung down in front of her. The sight of the old hag sent a chill running up China's spine and she felt as if someone had just stepped over her grave. China made a deliberate attempt to pick up speed as she was passing the woman, but she was forced to come to an abrupt stop when the hag reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

"Cross my palm with silver," the hag demanded in a deep, masculine-sounding voice. China was so taken aback by the randomness of the situation that she couldn't find her voice to respond. The hag repeated her demand and China tried to politely inform the old woman that she didn't possess any silver. The fact was that people didn't hold any currency in the modern age. All forms of monetary payment were made via digital banking. Credit cards and debit cards no longer existed. All that was required to make a payment was the simple scan of a fingerprint.

"Check your pockets," the old hag continued with her demands, all the while holding a tight grip on China's arm. China checked one of her pockets and pulled out her grandfather's gold compass, which she had no intentions of parting with.

"I told you, I don't have any silver on me," pleaded China in a worried tone.

"Check your other pocket!" the old hag insisted.

China couldn't fathom why the old woman wouldn't believe her when she said that she didn't have any silver in her possession, but she searched her other pocket in an effort to pacify the woman. China was startled to feel something solid between her fingers and yanked her hand rapidly from her pocket. She appeared to be holding a very old coin between her fingers. It was an old silver sixpence. China was at a loss to explain to the old woman how the

coin had ever managed to get into her pocket in the first place. She had never laid eyes on it before. The old hag beckoned for China to give her the coin and released the grip on her arm as soon as it fell into her hand.

"Now sit!" demanded the hag with all the manners of an irate Rottweiler.

"I really can't. I really don't have the time," China tried to explain, but her explanation was in vain. The old woman grabbed China harshly by the wrist and sat her down on the bench beside her. China was utterly dumbstruck by the old woman's aggression.

Before China found the power to react to the situation, the old hag spread a number of Tarot cards out before them on the wooden table. China was horrified at the sight of them. She had no time for charlatans and considered the use of Tarot cards to be associated with the dark arts, which was something that she didn't wish to dabble in.

The old hag instructed China to pick three cards from the deck. China refused to participate and quickly stood up, making her excuses.

"You have already crossed my palm with silver, therefore you must listen to what I have to say," the old hag informed China and dragged her back to the bench by the wrist once again. She repeated her instruction, to pick out three cards, and glared into China's eyes with the one rotten-looking eye that remained in her head. China felt goose bumps rising on her arms and so she was obliged to do as she was told. She picked out three cards and laid them face-down on the table. Glaring at the old woman, China felt a shudder running down her spine. Finding it difficult to look the old hag in the eye, China's gaze shifted to look over the woman's shoulder. Seeing the White Star Line building in the distance behind the hag, she realised how close she was to the Red Cross headquarters. Her gaze returned to the table in front of her as the old hag turned over the three chosen Tarot cards. China quivered, feeling as if someone were stepping across her grave once more. China didn't think it possible that the three cards could be exactly

the same and yet there they were, as plain as day: three Death cards in a row. The old hag pulled back in horror at the sight of the cards before her.

"I cannot see a future for you," she spoke gravely.

China was instantly alarmed by her words and demanded a further explanation.

The old hag repeated her message and scooped the cards up, returning them swiftly to the rest of the deck. China was completely unimpressed by the scenario and stood up in protest.

"I would really like to know what you mean by that comment," queried China.

The old hag was quick with her reply. "Your time is up! You have not long left in this world. Your time is up! Your time is up! Your time is up!" The old hag was almost delirious as she repeated the eerie message over and over again.

China had endured as much madness as she was willing to and muttered the words, "Crazy old fool!" before turning to make her leave.

The old hag grabbed her by the wrist one last time. She turned her head sideways as much as it would bend, in the most sinister manner and glared into China's eyes.

"He waits for you! He needs your help!" the old hag stated in an urgent tone.

"Who are you talking about? Is it my brother?" quizzed China in a panicked tone, her eyes widening with anticipation.

The old hag ignored China's questions and continued to spout more senseless gibberish. "Time is not on his side! Time is up! ... There is no time!"

China stood motionless, as if mesmerised by the old hag's words.

"I see a bomb! ... I see him! ... I see you! You must continue without him! ... The future depends on it! ... Your future depends on it!" With that, the old hag let go of China's arm and proceeded to pack her Tarot cards away before folding up the wooden table.

China stood silently watching as the hag casually picked up the

table, placed it under one arm and walked away. She turned her back on the hag for a moment and then swung back round within seconds to ask her one final question, but the hag had disappeared. It was as if she had vanished into thin air, which made China feel quite unnerved. She began to wonder if she had imagined the whole episode.

As she walked on towards the White Star Line building, she put her left hand into her pocket and, to her amazement, pulled out another silver sixpence. Again, she had no idea how a coin had simply landed in her pocket and she wondered if it was the same coin that she had given the old hag. Anything is possible after that, she thought.

China was disappointed that she didn't get to ask the disturbing-looking hag where she could find her brother. If this was the best way her brother had of making contact with her, she was sure that she would never find him. China toyed with the idea that if she did ever find him, she would have a serious bone to pick with him for the ridiculous messages, riddled with nonsense. She was quite certain that the hag wasn't a fake and took it as a sign that she was on the right path in life.

China continued to reflect on the jumbled messages she had received. Absolutely nothing made sense to her. The hag had told her that she couldn't see a future for her, that her time was up and that she hadn't long left in this world. Then there were the three Death cards that China had drawn and the mention of a bomb. She could only assume that she was destined to die in the war and yet there was the contradiction: *Continue without him ... Your future depends on it.*

China's mind travelled back to a visual image of the coffin that she had seen the previous day. She was now standing right in front of the White Star Line building and with the picture of the coffin still fresh in her mind, she got that old familiar feeling that she had been having lately, the feeling of someone treading across her grave. The hairs on the back of her neck were standing on end as she crossed the street to the Red Cross headquarters.

It was a large, modern-looking, six-storey building, topped with a solar panel roof, which perfectly reflected the sky above. There were throngs of people crowded around the front steps of the building, which led to the main entrance. China battled her way through the crowds, her eyes searching all around for a familiar face. All she saw was a sea of strange faces before her as the crowd heaved and pulled her this way and that. After hearing a familiar voice call out her name, she scanned all the faces around her until her eyes fell upon Jodie's smiling features.

"Over here, China!" Jodie called out as she jumped up several times and flapped her hands in the air, high above the bobbing heads and bodies that were blocking her from view.

China was thrilled to see her friend and started to push her way through the mass of bodies to get to Jodie. They managed to embrace each other with an awkward hug, despite all the pushing and shoving. Jodie muttered something about it being like Piccadilly Circus and led China through the maze of people, towards the door of the main entrance.

The chaos seemed somewhat more organised as they entered the front lobby of the building. There were numerous wardens on duty directing the sea of people to the correct queues. The wardens were smartly turned out in their Red Cross uniforms and seemed to be making an excellent attempt of controlling the crowd that continuously filed through the front door. It wasn't until China came face-to-face with one of the wardens that she realised they were humanoid robots. It was difficult for most people to tell the difference, but China had assisted her grandfather so many times when he had to re-programme humanoids in his workshop and so it was easy for her to pinpoint the tiny disparities. If people made the effort to take a closer look into the warden's eyes, they would just about be able to see the spark of crimson that glinted through the pupils. The only other indication that would give it away was a humanoid's inability to express anger. No matter how irate or violent a person became with a humanoid, they were usually programmed not to respond to violence. Their

calm, controlled temperance and indifference to such situations was usually the first clue that people picked up on.

The female humanoid, with its defined, chiselled features and faultless complexion, its perfect figure and insincere smile, politely greeted the two young ladies and enquired as to their business. Having informed the humanoid that they were volunteering for the war effort, they were promptly ushered to the longest queue. The humanoid gave them no information about what exactly they were queuing for or what the voluntary process involved. There were no signs or public announcements made to hint at what to expect. Jodie felt compelled to strike up a conversation with two other people ahead of her in the queue and inquired as to what exactly they were queuing up for. The two young men revealed that they too had no idea what was going on and had asked the woman standing in front of them. The woman had alleged that they were all queuing up to have themselves tagged with a microchip. It was a small tracking device, which was also capable of administering medication and recording information that could be of importance to the War Office.

Jodie and China wiled the time away chatting cheerfully to the two men in front of them, as the queue slowly but surely began to move along. It turned out that the men, who were in their early thirties, were actually brothers and were both qualified doctors who were more than happy to volunteer. It was obvious to China that Jodie was quite taken with the youngest brother as she seemed to giggle unnecessarily at every comment he made, whether or not it was actually funny. The elder brother eventually changed the lively tone of the conversation to a more sombre subject. He mentioned that from early morning, reports had been circulating the city about the mysterious abduction of a woman and her two young children from Bold Street the previous night. This time there were witnesses who reported that they had seen a group of Medieval knights, dressed in full chainmail and armed with swords and shields, emerge from the wall of a building on Bold Street to seize the woman and her children. The next thing

they recalled was a thick fog, which enveloped the remarkable scene as the knights, the woman and her children all vanished before their eyes. Upon hearing the tale, Jodie's eyes diverted from the narrator to China. She stared at China for a moment without blinking and China imparted a knowing look before twisting the conversation back to their notions of what they were all about to experience. China envisaged that they would all be posted to various hospitals located near the front. Jodie had a similar vision in her mind, while the two brothers supposed that they would become part of a mobile medical unit of sorts, whereby they would be teleported to the wounded soldiers and civilians. One thing that they could all agree on was that they would all shortly find out.

As they moved up the queue, it was possible to see people entering a room with a white door. When it was their turn to enter, the two brothers wished their new acquaintances well and proceeded through the door. China and Jodie were next in line and were both becoming slightly anxious. Jodie looked back at the long chain of people who were queuing behind them and nudged China. There were people of all ages, shapes and sizes lined up neatly behind them, men and women from all walks of life. China gazed at the row of people trailing behind them. She wondered how many of them, like her, had no actual medical experience. She hoped that she could live up to the task and trusted that the Red Cross would provide her with thorough, first-rate training.

As they waited to be called through the door, the man directly behind China began to talk loudly to his friend beside him. He was clearly animated as he started to tell his friend about accounts of poltergeist outbreaks that had hit London in the past few hours. China couldn't help but eavesdrop as the man went on to express fears that the outbreak would soon spread beyond central England. His voice rose dramatically as he continued to chatter about the subject, and China could tell that he was fascinated by it. This brought China's grandfather to mind and she wondered what he would do if the attacks spread as far as Liverpool. She believed that there would be no sense in her grandfather upping sticks, as it

would soon become impossible to hide. Poltergeist outbreaks were on a steady rise and fast becoming a global problem.

At last it was time for China and Jodie to enter the room, from which no one seemed to return. As they entered the room, they were faced with two, stern-looking female nurses who instructed them to lie down on two leather couches, located side by side in the centre of the bright, white-washed room. The nurses didn't impart any information as to what they were about to experience or even attempt to put them at ease.

China and Jodie did as they were instructed and didn't dare speak. The atmosphere was oppressive and Jodie got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. The nurse who was dealing with China leaned forward over her face as she was lying down. China caught her eye and immediately clocked the crimson glint in the centre of her pupils. It was another humanoid. There were two large, mechanical, surgical machines hanging over the patients' abdomens. The two nurses simultaneously positioned the machinery closer to China and Jodie's wrists on the left-hand side of their bodies and turned their arms around so that their palms were facing upwards. Without warning, the equipment blasted into action. A thick, red laser beam proceeded to burn a circular pattern onto the skin on the inside of their wrists. Jodie was somewhat horrified and China, although taken by surprise, was a little intrigued. They watched as the complex-looking machinery inserted a small, metallic disc, no bigger than a fingernail, under the circular patch of skin, which had been cut by the laser. The medical procedure was ended by a blue laser beaming down on the incision and closing the wound. What impressed China the most about the whole technique was that it was completely pain-free and lasted less than three minutes. Without speaking another word, the nurses, in their detached manner, gestured towards a door behind the leather couches.

The patients needed no further prompting to make a hasty exit and found themselves in a gloomy corridor, which smelled fusty and old. There was a wooden, spiral staircase at the end of the

corridor with another humanoid warden on standby to guide them in the right direction. The humourless-looking humanoid instructed them to proceed down the staircase into the basement, where they were to leave all their belongings in the wooden crates provided. Much to China and Jodie's amazement, when they entered the basement, the first two crates to be seen had their names on them, as well as a ten-digit code consisting of numbers and letters. They hadn't been asked their identity since they arrived and yet the crates had been efficiently tagged and placed directly in front of them, ready for collection. China guessed that the microchips in their arms were already feeding information to the humanoids that were programmed to organise their luggage. It seemed to be a most fascinating operation.

As they were beckoned to move along through the vast mountains of crates on either side of them, they were guided to another corridor with several doors in a row, all on the right-hand side of the building. They were briefly separated and sent into two different rooms to be medically assessed. China wasn't surprised to see the familiar crimson glint as she looked into the eyes of her female doctor. She had never been medically examined by a robot before in her life and found it to be a most frustrating experience. Throughout the examination, the doctor remained silent and her face was expressionless. The doctor's hands were as cold as her manner as she placed her stethoscope on China's chest. The doctor seemed to listen to her heartbeat for longer than was necessary and then opened the square door, which revealed China's mechanical heart. China searched the doctor's face for some kind of reaction, but she didn't even flinch. Instead, she closed the door and continued with her examination as she listened to China's lungs. China didn't volunteer any information about her mechanical heart, as she felt that the doctor wouldn't appreciate the interruption.

China wasn't at all surprised that the doctor didn't speak, even after the examination had ended. As the whole ordeal was so cold and impersonal, she was glad to leave the room.

As she stepped out into the empty corridor, China breathed a sigh of relief. Her sigh was interrupted by the opening of the door to the next room as Jodie walked out onto the corridor to join her. Their eyes met and they both laughed out loud.

"That was the strangest experience I've ever had," exclaimed Jodie. "The doctor didn't speak one word, no matter how many times I tried to strike up a conversation."

"It was exactly the same for me," replied China. "I was tempted to shout into her ear to see how she would react, but I imagined it would have been a bad idea."

The final part of the recruitment process wasn't half as daunting as the first part. They were guided to the last room at the bottom of the corridor, which led into a massive lecture theatre with rows upon rows of red, upholstered seats in a semi-circular pattern. Each row descended downwards, until the final row met with a large semi-circular platform. The theatre was almost packed to full capacity with the rest of the volunteers who had queued before them. They were instructed to take a seat and await an announcement. A sea of chatter was flowing through the theatre, which aided in lulling China into a more relaxed state of mind.

China guessed that, at this stage of the recruiting process, there would finally be some sort of human interaction; their duties would be clearly explained in full and they would be informed of their destination. This wasn't the case. A sudden hush fell over the crowded theatre as greyish wisps of thick smoke began to rise from the centre of the platform below. A life-size hologram of a slender, blonde, female humanoid gradually merged into focus through the wisps of smoke, which flickered slightly at first, causing the hologram to wobble. China wasn't at all surprised to see a hologram. She was quickly beginning to realise that since they had entered the building, they hadn't encountered one single human being who worked for the organisation. Robots in service were definitely on a steady increase in recent years, but there were usually a number of humans within close proximity, working alongside them. It was thought that automatons and humanoids simply complimented the

highly skilled and intellectually superior human workforce. It was unusual to witness an organisation entirely run by humanoids.

The theatre became so silent that it would have been possible to hear a pin drop when the hologram began to speak.

“The Red Cross would like to welcome you and thank you for your decision to volunteer with us. While we value your dedication to serve in the Red Cross, we ask you to value our policy to support the endeavours of the War Office by swearing an oath of silence.”

Upon hearing the words ‘oath of silence’, Jodie grimaced out of shock and immediately turned her head towards China, who displayed an equally puzzled expression on her face.

The hologram continued to deliver its message: “The War Office has stipulated that you, as Red Cross volunteers, are required to practice a code of strict confidentiality at all times. All information is to be treated as highly classified. All discussions regarding the war effort are strictly forbidden. Questions regarding the location of your post are strictly forbidden. Attempting to make any form of contact with persons residing outside of your allocated zones of duty is also strictly forbidden.”

The image of the blonde humanoid delivering the brief seemed austere and foreboding.

China shifted anxiously in her seat at the thought of not being permitted to contact her grandfather. She listened intently as the hologram went on.

“The Red Cross asks that you cooperate with your superiors at all times and would like to draw your attention to the highly sophisticated tagging devices that have been implanted in your wrists. This specialised microchip system, generously supplied by the War Office, is designed to record any information disclosed by you regarding the war effort. Should you choose to break your vow of silence or disobey orders of any kind, the microchip will serve to remind you of your oath of silence by administering an electrically charged pulse directly into your nervous system via your wrist.”

Although the audience remained quiet, the reaction of shock clearly rippled throughout the packed theatre as clusters of heads turned towards one another in unison, silently sharing their expression of astonishment. China and Jodie gazed at one another, both speechless with bewilderment. There wasn't one soul in the room that wasn't taken aback by the threatening message that they had received. China lowered her eyes from Jodie's gaze and looked down at the circular scar on her tiny wrist. She now considered the microchip inside her to be a weapon.

The hologram went on to say that the oath of silence was necessary for the protection of Red Cross members and that it was vital to the war effort not to disclose information of any kind to any persons outside of the organisation. It was stated that even if members discussed matters amongst themselves it was deemed to be a menace to the war effort.

China began to become increasingly suspicious of the involvement of the War Office with the Red Cross.

The general atmosphere within the theatre was more sombre than it had been at the start of the lecture. The volunteers were all beginning to quietly wonder what exactly it was that they had signed up for. Most people in the room purposely volunteered with the Red Cross to avoid military duty and wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the War Office. It came as a surprise to many that the War Office had a strong link with the Red Cross.

The hologram had paused briefly and a soft murmur of voices gently swirled throughout the audience. It was quite unexpected when rows upon rows of digital scanners emerged from the backs of seats and once more a sudden hush fell over the room. This was the final part of the recruitment process. The volunteers were instructed to sit still to allow the machines to scan the retinas of their eyes with the use of red laser-beam technology. At that stage, it was official; they were full-fledged members of the Red Cross. The members were now free to leave the lecture theatre.

As they were making their way out of the room, China thought

it rather odd that there was absolutely no mention of the training that they were supposed to receive.

Filing out onto the corridor, the large crowd of newly recruited Red Cross members were led down a flight of stairs to what looked to be a large warehouse. If it were not for the rows upon rows of wooden benches lined up against the walls on either side, the warehouse would have appeared to be empty. On closer inspection, China realised that there were neat bundles of clothes and pairs of shiny, black, leather boots laid out on the wooden benches as far as the eye could see. This was obviously a makeshift changing room, yet there wasn't a single mirror to be found throughout. Having received instructions to change into their uniforms, an outburst of conversations rumbled and echoed throughout the long, spacious warehouse. Not only was it a communal changing area, but it was also a unisex changing area, which appalled the majority of people. The men were the first to remove their clothing, unbuttoning shirts and pulling vests off over their heads. The women were slower to get started, many of them too modest to change with men present in the room. A few brazen women scattered here and there eventually got things moving along by removing their blouses and unbuttoning their dresses. Some stood confidently in their bras and lingerie, while others meekly hid themselves as best as they could, turning towards the walls and kneeling down to duck behind the benches. The whole ordeal made many people feel as if they were being treated like cattle in a barn, causing some to be a little upset and embarrassed by the experience. Since there were no mirrors available, people were obliged to assist one another, fastening buttons and buckles, pinning badges, smoothing out collars and adjusting hats and caps.

Every man and woman looked a great deal smarter, all turned out in their stylish uniforms. The men wore dark grey trousers tucked into their black, leather boots, white shirts with breast pockets on either side and the Red Cross logo sewn high up near the shoulders on each sleeve. They wore red cravats tied neatly around their collars and dark grey waistcoats to match their

trousers. Their grey waistcoats were criss-crossed by a white cross belt from shoulder to shoulder with a white belt running around their waists. The men were also issued with a long, dark, grey overcoat bearing the Red Cross logo, which fell just above the tops of their boots. They had a choice of a grey hat or cap bearing the Red Cross symbol, which depended on whether they were on duty or parade.

The women's uniforms were designed to match the men's in colour, but differed slightly in that they wore long, dark grey pinafores over their white shirts, which fell just above the tops of their ankle boots. The pinafores were criss-crossed by a white cross belt running from shoulder to shoulder with a white belt buckled around the waist. A thin, red scarf was tied around their necks and they too were issued with long, dark, grey overcoats, grey hats and caps.

As they stood tall, all kitted out in their uniforms, giving the impression of a military presence, the members finally felt as if they now belonged to the organisation. Many seemed to stand with a new-found pride, ready for action and eagerly awaiting instruction of their duties.

There were two exits at the end of the changing room, in front of which stood two male, uncompromising-looking humanoids. China wondered why some humanoids were programmed to brandish phony smiles while others were not. She reckoned that in some circumstances a smile was just not required and it would simply be unnecessary to programme them to do so. It soon became obvious that the two humanoids standing at the end of the room were scanning people's retinas with red laser beams that projected out from their eyes. It appeared that this was the method of segregating the members into two different groups. After they had been scanned, each person was directed to pass through one of the two doors to the back of the room. There was a racket at times, where friends or family members were being split up and sent their separate ways.

China watched as people started to become suspicious and

began asking the humanoids questions about where the two doors were leading and why they were being split into two groups. The questions went unanswered and each person who made an enquiry let out a little yelp as they held onto their wrists where the microchips had been implanted.

It was China and Jodie's turn to have their retinas scanned and having witnessed what had happened to those before them, they both choose to remain silent as they were instructed to pass through two opposite doors. They briefly grabbed at each other's hands and exchanged wistful glances before entering the two different corridors.

China was beginning to regret her decision to join the Red Cross and wondered if military service would have been a better choice. She followed the rest of the group ahead of her and listened to the whispers that began to circulate. People were discussing the fact that members with medical experience and qualifications had been guided through the left door, while members with no medical experience or qualifications were led through the right door. It appeared to China that by scanning their retinas, the humanoids were obviously capable of distinguishing between doctors, nurses, qualified and unqualified members. It made her wonder what other kinds of information could be extracted from scanning their retinas.

China imagined that they were segregation so training could commence. It was her estimation that they would probably spend a month or two being trained up as paramedics and nurses in a hospital far away from the frontline and then they would be posted closer to the action, upon completion of training.

As the large group of unqualified members continued down the corridor, their whispers suddenly transformed into loud shrieks and gasps. They could hear the roaring of a clearly distressed man at the end of the corridor as he tried to outrun two male humanoids. He was running in the direction of the group and shouting out something about a massive conspiracy.

"It's a trap! Don't go any further! It's a trap!" he shouted before

one of the humanoids reached out its arm, held it up in the direction of the hysterical man and a shot a powerful bolt of electricity out of the palm of its hand, crippling the man and bringing him down on his knees. It was difficult to tell whether he was still alive. The two humanoids proceeded to drag his limp body by the arms into a room close by.

It was a disturbing sight for all who had witnessed it and it left the group feeling unnerved. They continued down the gloomy corridor until they came to a large archway leading to a deep underground cavern. China spotted several large, silver spheres lined up in a row, resting on a steel platform. The spheres seemed to be spinning on the spot where they were resting. A number of chunky, metal automatons were removing the crates containing the group's luggage from large trolleys and placing them in organised rows along the line of spheres. This led her to the conclusion that they were standing in some sort of station and were about to be teleported to their new destinations. China couldn't help but think about the distraught man that they had just witnessed running away from the direction of the station. She remembered that he had been shouting something about not going any further and the words 'It's a trap' began to echo in her mind.

The group was further instructed to walk along the platform, collect their luggage and board the silver spheres. The only other information they were given was that all medical kits and equipment would be issued upon their arrival at the front.

There were numerous humanoids on standby to assist people as they boarded the spheres. The telepods were the most peculiar-looking objects that China had ever seen and she couldn't believe her eyes when she saw exactly how other people were boarding them. There were no doors through which one could enter the spheres, so the humanoids were guiding people by the hand, assisting them to simply walk through the outer shell and step into the sphere. It seemed to be the equivalent of walking through a wall.

It came to be China's turn to enter. Only ten people were

allowed to enter each sphere and China happened to be the last to board hers. She held her breath as she gripped the humanoid's icy cold hand, reluctantly stepping forward and pushing herself through the silver surface. She was met with the slightest resistance at first, but eventually managed to push herself right through to the inside of the sphere. Once she was through, the sphere seemed to be more spacious on the inside than it was on the outside. Looking all around her, China was met with gloomy faces. She accidentally leaned back against the wall of the sphere and expected that she might fall back through it, ending up outside again, but it was rock solid. There were no seats inside, just like the telepods that she was used to. All the other passengers were gathered around in a circle, leaning against the wall and facing the huge mechanical engine positioned in the centre of the sphere. It was a most bizarre-looking piece of equipment. There were circuit boards, nuts, bolts, metal bars, glass cylinders and several clocks, both large and small. A large compass was embedded in the centre of the ceiling, surrounded by gears of all shapes and sizes, and wires, which twisted this way and that. It was a most impressive sight to behold and not like anything her grandfather had ever invented before. China guessed that a complex and sophisticated-looking engine of its calibre and size must have been necessary to teleport them to a country faraway overseas.

The light inside the sphere was dim. There were wisps of greenish-grey smoke swirling all about the circular walls of the sphere. China suddenly thought of Jodie and wondered if she were going through the exact same thing as she was at that very moment. She wished that they could travel together. Searching the empty faces around her, she felt utterly alone for the first time. It bothered her immensely that she had no idea where they were being posted. She was annoyed to think that Jodie might possibly be posted to a different location than hers. There would be no way of contacting Jodie if she didn't know where she was based.

Not one person spoke as they waited anxiously for something to happen. China wanted to break the ice by striking up a conver-

sation with someone, but she really had nothing to say. Her mind was racing with anxiety and the silence was only serving to wind her up. Her thoughts were in turmoil and images of war and death flashed through her head like a slideshow: she saw images of soldiers with guns; limp, lifeless bodies lying in pools of blood; the old hag that she had met earlier; the three Tarot cards laid out on the wooden table, hinting of death. Then she saw the coffin that had been lying in her grandfather's warehouse. Her thoughts were becoming too much for her to bear and her head began to ache. Feeling as if her brain was about to explode, she could no longer stand the silence burning through her ears. Her anxiety shattered the silence like a hammer through ice as she cried out.

"Someone must have some idea where the hell we're going!"

The other people standing in a circle all around her were startled by the sudden outburst. At first no one attempted to reply to the question. They looked on in horror at China as she held onto her wrist where the microchip had been implanted. She began to scream out in pain. After a few moments, the intense pain subsided and having learned a valuable lesson, she decided to remain quiet once again.

A man who happened to be standing next to her turned towards her with a sympathetic look and began to speak.

"You know you really shouldn't ask questions about ..." The man was stopped in his tracks before he could finish his sentence and he too held out his wrist as he roared aloud with pain. Some people glared at China and began to shake their heads, while others simply frowned at her. From that moment on, not a single word was spoken amongst the group, which further added to China's loneliness, as she sank further and deeper into her own thoughts.

Once again, she watched images flash across her mind's eye. She could see the old hag again, but this time she was waving the three Death Tarot cards in her face. She heard the echoes in her mind, of the distressed man dragged away by the humanoids, calling out the words, *It's a trap! It's a trap!* She then found herself

standing in front of the coffin once more. This time she leaned forward so that she could look inside it. She recoiled in horror and drew back as she saw herself laid out in the coffin. Her mind was deeply troubled. She thought about the war again and truly wondered if she were destined to die before her time.



CHAPTER 5
THE WRONG WAR



Something was very wrong. Inside the sphere the greenish-grey wisps of smoke that had been circulating the walls began to build up into a thick, luminous, green fog. It was so thick that China couldn't see a hand in front of her, let alone see the rest of the people who were standing around her. Then the sphere began to shake violently without warning. Everyone began to feel slightly nauseous. All of a sudden, China's head began to feel weightless as if it didn't belong to her body. Then her entire body felt as if it were being stretched. She wanted to cry out, but found it impossible to do so. She realised that she wasn't capable of uttering a sound. No one else seemed to be screaming out, or if they were, she certainly couldn't hear them. In fact, there was nothing to be heard but an eerie silence. She could no longer feel the floor beneath her feet and somehow found that she was falling into a dark emptiness. There was nothing but blackness, broken up by swirls of luminous-green fog circling upwards around her, giving her the impression that she was falling through a tunnel. Eventually, her sense of hearing seemed to return to her, as she could hear the crackling, sizzling sound of electricity all around her. Tiny elec-

trical charges were sizzling and flashing in and out of the atmosphere, becoming entwined in the swirling fog. She could feel the electricity in the air. It was difficult for her to tell how long she had been travelling inside the sphere, but it seemed to go on for a long time. She thought to herself that this was the worst case of travel sickness that she had ever experienced. This wasn't the way that she usually felt when she was teleported.

The nightmare ended abruptly and although still surrounded by darkness, China could finally feel the ground beneath her feet. The luminous swirls of fog and the electric charges had ceased. Feeling a little dizzy and disorientated, she tried to focus her eyes on a small pinprick of light that shone ahead in the distance. Her eyes were aching as they began to adjust to the brightness that was expanding from the distant light. She was baffled to discover that the light shining in the distance was in fact an old-fashioned street lamp, standing on the corner of a lonely pavement. It was the type of lamppost that was common hundreds of years ago.

Rubbing her eyes and stumbling forward, she looked downwards and caught a glimpse of the cobbled road that she was walking on. The further along she walked, the more her eyes began to adjust to the scenery around her and she realised that she was completely alone; her fellow passengers were nowhere to be seen.

It was night time and the air was crisp, cold and smelled of smoke. She was glad of her long, warm overcoat. It had been about three o'clock in the afternoon when she boarded the sphere, so the fact that it had suddenly become dark made China wonder what country she had been teleported to. She imagined that there must have been a significant time difference. As she walked towards the pavement where the streetlamp stood, she noticed some old, rundown buildings and rubble on either side of the street, as well as the remains of a picturesque church in the distance. There appeared to be a golden statue of the Madonna and Child on the very top of the church bell tower, which had been badly damaged and fallen over to one side, just barely hanging on. Not a single

person was to be seen and it struck China as peculiar when she realised that there were no modern buildings, jetpacks, telepods or hovercrafts in sight. Nor was there any sign of airships, drones or automatons. It seemed that she had been transported to a quaint little village in a backward country.

Feeling weak, she stood for a moment to gather her strength and find her bearings. The only signs of life that she could see were the dimly lit windows of some cottages up ahead. She walked further along the pavement towards the cottages, trying to work out why she had arrived alone and why she had felt so peculiar in the telepod. She could only conclude that something had gone terribly wrong and she had ended up being teleported to the wrong place.

It was the oddest thing for China to see a candle flickering in the window of someone's home. She had only ever heard of such things in stories. As she stood in front of the first cottage window that she came by, her confused thoughts were broken by the welcome intrusion of music in the distance. It sounded like an old-fashioned singsong with a piano tinkling in the background. The jolly sound was coming from the direction of a charming old tavern further on up the street on the opposite side of the road, near the church.

China didn't waste any more time standing around and made her way towards the music. Closer to the doorway, she could hear deep voices and loud laughter, which almost blotted out the singing and the piano playing. Feeling more at ease that she had at last come across some natives, China stood up straight and braced herself before entering the door of the tavern. She hoped to finally figure out what country, or indeed what continent, she had landed on.

Nothing could have prepared her for the peculiar scene she witnessed inside. It had immediately sprung into her mind that she had either walked onto a film set or she had somehow ended up back in time. It was bizarre; every single person in the tavern was

dressed in the most unusual way. There were a lot more men than women in the tavern. Most of the men wore old-fashioned military uniforms, while the women wore old-fashioned blouses buttoned up to the neck with long skirts, which fell to the floor, their hair bundled up on their heads in an out-of-date fashion. The few men who wore old-fashioned, civilian clothes seemed to be over the age of sixty. All she could do was stare. If it were a fancy-dress party with a historical theme of some description, these people had gone to a hell of a lot of trouble to get it just right.

Still standing in the doorway, China took note of every last detail that struck her as odd: wax dripped from candles onto rustic-looking tables; the minimal furnishings were shabby and old; tatty lace curtains hung halfway up the windows; the long, red, velvet drapes that framed the windows were tied to the sides and trailed upon the floor; there was an oil lamp resting on the top of the antique piano in the corner; brassy-looking, decorative frames with faded black and white photos hung on the walls in between the plain wooden shelves, which were crammed with tarnished old books and oil lamps. The bar counter itself was a plain wooden structure and the bar keeper stood behind it looked as quaint as the curious-looking bottles of liquor on the shelves behind him. To China's amazement, most of the men in the tavern were smoked cigarettes, while some were even playing cards! Smoking in a bar was one thing, but to sit and wile the time away with an outmoded pastime such as playing cards was a positively weird thing to do. These people were utterly strange to China, but as strange as they may have been, she was determined to make her way through the unusual setting towards the bar to find out where she was.

The bar keeper continued to polish glasses with a white cloth as she approached him to politely enquire as to what country she was in. Surprisingly, the bar keeper didn't speak English and although he replied to her in a language that she didn't understand, she immediately realised what country she was in. His accent was French, leading China to believe that she was in France. This was confirmed by the odd French word she understood from other

punters' conversations. Her vocabulary probably consisted of about ten common French words, which were not going to help her get by. She hoped that someone spoke English and could perhaps explain to her where the rest of her colleagues from the Red Cross had gotten to. She thought that they must all surely have been posted to the same village.

Standing at the bar with her back to the bar keeper, she looked about and took stock of the people around her. She noticed that there were two distinct types of uniform present. Some men wore blue uniforms while others wore khaki-green uniforms.

She was standing, listening to the chatter and music, wondering what to do next, when the singing and piano playing came to a sudden stop at the end of a song. During the break in the music, the volume of the chattering voices seemed to increase and much to China's delight, she could make out the familiar sound of English-speaking voices. She searched for the voices with her eyes and found their source. There was a group of four soldiers dressed in khaki-green uniforms all speaking English with British accents.

Her gaze caught the eye of the oldest gentleman in the group. He was in his late twenties, had a handsome face and was clean shaven except for a neat moustache, which suited him quite well. He had the most piercing greyish-blue eyes China had ever seen.

Although she was content to have found people who spoke English, she felt a little uncomfortable about the way the soldier continued to stare at her. He didn't seem to blink and didn't take his gaze away from her until one of his comrades slapped his shoulder in a playful manner. The group then burst into laughter at a joke that the staring soldier had clearly not listened to. He turned to the rest of the soldiers and gave them a vacant smile before returning his gaze to China.

Just as soon as she had decided to approach the group of soldiers to ask them for their help, the staring soldier rose to his feet. China stood and watched as he made his excuses for leaving to the rest of the group and again turned his gaze towards China. She gulped hard when she realised that he was walking towards

her. She nervously looked away for a moment as the soldier stopped directly in front of her, blocking her view so that she had no choice but to look upon his handsome face. He was a good deal taller than her and had a fine, full head of fair hair. Their eyes locked.

"I noticed that you're alone and looking a little bit lost. I wonder if I could be of any assistance to you?" The soldier was well spoken, with an unmistakeable Liverpool accent and a deep, manly voice.

China hesitated and chose her words carefully, not wanting to come across as if she were lost.

"I seem to have gotten separated from my group and thought that maybe some of them might have come in here," she responded, trying to remain cool and collected even though she was feeling completely out of place.

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't seen any other Red Cross members come by this evening, but my fellow officers and I can offer you a lift back to the field hospital later, as we will be passing that way. We will drop you there before midnight if you care to join us for a drink and wait a while?" His tone was soft and he had a kind look about his face. For some unknown reason, China felt that she could trust this man with her life and so she decided to allow him to escort her to the field hospital.

"My name is Second Lieutenant Applebee," the soldier informed her as he reached out and took a hold of her hand to shake it. "But you can call me Eric," he smiled.

She shook his hand and held her breath a moment as she gazed into his piercing eyes before she found the ability to introduce herself. She wondered what side of the war he was fighting for, but out of politeness she didn't like to ask. She guessed that he might have signed up with the International Armed Forces.

He smiled at her and leaned over his shoulder to order two whiskeys from the bar keeper. China watched as he reached towards the breast pocket of his uniform jacket and pulled out a leather wallet. China was intrigued; she didn't know of any man

who carried a wallet on their person. Although she thought it a strange enough thing to see, what he pulled out of his wallet was stranger still: old paper money, the kind that existed hundreds of years ago. She was flabbergasted to see that the bar keeper took the paper money as payment for the whiskeys and slapped three coins back down on the counter in front of the soldier. There wasn't a country in the world that had used this kind of outdated currency in well over two hundred years. No one she had ever met had ever seen or handled paper money like this unless it was in a museum or antique store. Paper money was rare, but rarer still was the sight of a newspaper like the one that a passing man had just landed on the bar counter in front of China. This was the final straw; she was really beginning to feel like she was losing the plot. It wasn't until she glimpsed at the foreign newspaper and saw the date that she finally lost the run of herself. Although the newspaper was in French, she could clearly make out the date at the top right-hand corner of the page:

July 14th 1916

Much to the soldier's surprise, China made a run for the door of the tavern and didn't look back or stop running until she had cleared the street, hiding herself in an alleyway around the corner from the tavern. The soldier was too late in following her and stood in the middle of the street in front of the tavern with a puzzled expression on his face.

It had finally dawned on China that she had somehow slipped back in time. She was completely horrified at the prospect of it. Having never experienced time travel before, she wasn't sure what to expect next and assumed that it was some sort of mistake. The fact that she had ended up in this time and place by herself seemed to be proof that it wasn't meant to have happened. If it were a mistake, she would just have to wait until someone was sent to find her. How long she would have to wait was anyone's guess. It had also occurred to her that she had been feeling unwell just prior

to her arrival, which could possibly mean that she was hallucinating.

Feeling cold and tired, she huddled on her hunkers against a cobbled wall in the alleyway and pulled the collar of her long overcoat closer against her neck. She could hardly believe what was happening to her. It wasn't how she imagined her first day on the job to be. Being trapped in the past, she realised that she would never be able to find her brother. Time travel was such a dodgy concept, which meant that her chances of returning to her present timeline were very slim. She knew that she was going to have to accept the fact that she was lost in time. After all, time travellers went missing every day of the week; it was really nothing new.

Covering her face with her hands, she tucked her head down and rested it on her knees. She thought back to the history books she had read and realised that being in France during 1916 meant that she was caught up in World War I, or the Great War as it was also known, a term that she always thought to be ironic, since there really was nothing great about a war. This was huge. She couldn't understand how on earth the Red Cross had landed her in the middle of the wrong war. What an outrageous mistake to make.

The sound of a door creaking open and a woman's laughter caught China's attention. Lifting her head from her knees where she was squatting on the ground, she watched as a tall, dark-haired man in a Red Cross uniform stepped out from a doorway and lingered for a few moments as he playfully fooled about with the laughing woman, who was seeing him off. His Red Cross uniform was slightly different to the rest of her male colleagues in that it was a khaki-green colour, similar to that of the British soldiers that she had seen in the tavern. The man leaned forward as if to kiss the woman and promptly pulled away, deliberately teasing her. The more he teased her, the more she laughed. The man said his final farewell to the unkempt woman and proceeded to tuck his shirt into his trousers as he walked away from her.

"Do call again, sweetheart, if you have the money to spare," the

woman exclaimed in a thick French accent and laughed before stepping aside at the door to let her next client in.

China speedily rose to her feet so that the man would notice her uniform as he passed her. Just as he came close to China, he looked straight into her face and then lowered his line of vision to the Red Cross logo on her overcoat. He stopped dead in his tracks and China opened her mouth as if to speak, but no words came out.

"What in the name of God is a girl like you doing in a place like this?" enquired the middle-aged man in a strong British accent.

"Funny you should ask that question," responded China as she raised her eyebrows.

"And why aren't you back at camp with the others?" the man further enquired as he looked her uniform up and down with a puzzled expression. "Let's get you back where you belong, miss," he said in a softer tone of voice, not waiting for her to answer his question, as he lifted her duffle bag and swung it over his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her in a fatherly fashion and guided her away from the cobbled wall behind her. "An alleyway like this at this hour of the night is no place for a lady," he further added, walking her out onto the lamp-lit street.

China felt safe in his company and sensed that he would do his best to get her back home if she asked for his help.

"I really need your help," China pleaded as she stopped walking to stand in the middle of the street.

The man also stopped and stood motionless, raising his brows as he waited for her to continue speaking.

"I'm really not supposed to be here ... I don't belong here ... I'm in the wrong war," she explained, realising how crazy the words sounded as they came out of her mouth. Just then an old man on a horse and cart trotted up the cobbled street past China, a sight that she had never seen before.

"Well, of course you're in the wrong war, miss. Aren't we all!" the man laughed as he began to walk ahead of her a little.

"So, you're a time traveller too?" China asked eagerly as she took a step towards him.

The man laughed before he responded, "What's gotten into you tonight? Did you visit the tavern earlier?"

"Well, yes I did, but ..." China didn't get the chance to finish her sentence before the man interrupted her with loud laughter and told her not to worry, that he would soon sober her up when he got her back to the camp.

He walked back towards her and gently pushed her along the street with one hand on the small of her back. China argued along the way that she hadn't been drinking and that she really was a time traveller from the future, and every so often the man would stop walking to grab a hold of his side as he laughed heartily at her foolish carry on.

They didn't have too far to walk before they came to a most remarkable-looking ambulance, typical of its day. China, with her eye for fine antiques, was truly intrigued by it.

The man, who had introduced himself as Jack Harper, helped China leap up onto the back of the ambulance before he walked around to the driver's door and climbed in. China was obliged to ride in the back, as the front passenger seat had been removed to allow extra space for storing medical supplies. Jack was an advanced paramedic and ambulance driver for the Red Cross, with over ten years' experience. He told China that the war was his toughest challenge to date and that he hoped he would live long enough to face further challenges long after the war had ended. It quickly became obvious to China that since he clearly belonged to that particular period in time, Jack couldn't possibly comprehend what the concept of time travel was and wouldn't be capable of helping her in any way. China decided that it would be wiser to keep quiet about her predicament until she came across someone who may be capable of helping her. In an attempt to embrace her new existence and fit into her new surroundings, China played along, telling Jack that she had only recently been recruited and had just arrived in France earlier that day. She told him that she

had wandered off away from her group and that she had no idea where she was based. Jack informed her that he was taking her to a camp located not too far away from the Somme. China's blood ran cold as images and snippets of text from books that she had read flashed through her mind. She recalled reading about the Battle of the Somme: one of the bloodiest battles of World War I. She tried to conceal her terror from Jack and decided that it would be best to let him do most of the talking for the rest of the journey.

Jack was clearly a man who liked a good chat. He informed China that they were heading to a casualty clearing station in a small village outside of the town of Albert. He explained that the casualty clearing station was a medical camp consisting of tents, run and operated by the Royal Army Medical Corps. Once the sick and wounded soldiers had been treated at the clearing station, they were either returned to their units or evacuated to base hospitals. He further explained that patients were often transported by special ambulance trains or by barge along the canal.

In an effort to put China at ease, Jack went into a little more detail on their journey. They would pick up supplies at the casualty clearing station and then move onto a field hospital located nearby, not too far from the frontline. Jack explained that due to the recent shortage of nurses at that particular field hospital, it would make sense to bring her there for duty. He wasn't sure whether she would be posted at a dressing station or a bearer post along the frontline. The one thing that Jack was sure of was the fact that she would be floating between the field hospital and the casualty clearing station for an unforeseen duration.

Aware that China was a new recruit, Jack felt obliged to explain what her duties would entail.

"You will be dealing with all sorts of medical issues here: skin diseases, infectious diseases, nervous disorders, venereal diseases, limb amputations, trench foot ..."

Although grateful for the necessary induction, China was becoming slightly overwhelmed by the volume of information that Jack had imparted. He quickly became conscious of this when he

realised how quiet and withdrawn she had become and so he stopped talking, allowing her to gather her thoughts.

It wasn't until they were only a mile away from the casualty clearing station that events began to take a most sinister turn. They had been driving along a dirt path in the countryside for some time. The moon had retreated behind a thick blanket of cloud and the fields and hills that surrounded them took on a malevolent form in the blackness of the night. Peering out through the back of the ambulance, China didn't feel safe. The menacing, dark shapes and shadows of the landscape began to torture her mind, creating flashbacks of what she had experienced as she travelled back in time. All of a sudden, a face caught her eye in the darkness and she yelled at Jack to stop the ambulance. It was a familiar face, yet it was full of anguish and fright.

The ambulance came to a rapid halt and China jumped out onto the stony dirt path below her. She dashed towards the terror-stricken man who was leaning back against a stone wall, which separated the field from the dirt path. When she got close enough to him, she could see that he too was wearing a Red Cross uniform, modern like hers. She then recognised him as the man who had stood next to her in the sphere. He had attempted to speak to her and was punished for it. The man was shaking violently from head to toe and his face was deathly pale. He was shaking that much that his teeth were chattering loudly in his head and, looking down at his trousers, it had become apparent that he had soiled himself. What alarmed China most about the man's condition was the fact that his eyes were almost bulging right out of their sockets and he didn't appear to be able to blink.

Jack stood back a little distance from China, weighing up the situation, before running to the ambulance to retrieve his medical kit. The man was clearly suffering from severe shock. At first it appeared that he wasn't suffering from any form of physical injury, until China drew closer to him and noticed that one of his hands was stuck in the wall. Jack came closer to take a look and gasped as he realised that the man's hand seemed to be completely

embedded in one of the large rocks in the centre of the wall. It was a truly mindboggling sight. They tried in vain to get the man to tell them who he was or what had happened, but he had clearly lost his mind and wasn't capable of uttering a word.

All of a sudden, China let out a blood-curdling scream. She almost went into a frenzy of screaming before grabbing hold of Jack by the shoulders and then her eyes began to flood with tears. Jack quickly turned away from the jittering wreck of a man to follow China's panic-stricken gaze.

In the field, just beyond the stone wall, was a large, thick oak tree. Jack's mouth almost lock-jawed at the sight of what appeared to be a human body embedded inside the base of the tree. It was as if the person had somehow walked through the tree and become lodged inside it. On closer inspection, they realised that it was a woman and that her entire upper torso was lodged inside the bark of the tree, with her neck and head jutting out to one side of it. It was obvious that she was dead, her eyes wide open with a most painful expression on her face, as if she had recoiled in horror at having witnessed something truly terrifying. Most of her head was intact, except for a large thick branch, which seemed to be entrenched in the centre of her skull. Her arms appeared to be dangling free, but her left hand seemed to have disappeared into a branch. One of her legs was hanging free above ground level, while the other leg was completely rooted in the ground, without having broken the soil. It was as if she had somehow melted into the scenery and became embedded within it.

China recognised the woman to be one of the other Red Cross volunteers who had been present in the sphere with her. A lot of blood had oozed from the parts of the woman's body that had become stuck inside the tree. The blood had long since dried up. China shook her head in disbelief. It was just not possible for a human body to become so contorted and merge into a solid object like that. It defied the known laws of physics. She figured that it must have had something to do with a serious flaw in time travel.

Jack, who up until now had been completely speechless, pulled

a hipflask full of whiskey out of the inside pocket of his overcoat and guzzled quite a bit of it down. He then broke his silence.

"In all my experience of death, I have never before seen anything quite like this."

Jack's hands were trembling as he held the hipflask out towards China to take a sip. China also guzzled the stuff down, which burned the back of her throat, right down to the pit of her stomach.

Jack had quickly decided that he had seen enough of the woman's corpse and made his way back to the distressed man. He stood for a moment, staring at the man's wrist jutting out from the wall and contemplated two solutions to the problem in his mind.

China broke his train of thought by asking him what they should do. Jack looked into the man's bulging wide eyes as he jittered and jerked about uncontrollably. He turned his gaze towards China before he answered her.

"Well, the first option that comes to mind is that we amputate his hand from the wrist. The trouble is, the bugger is in that much shock, I don't believe his mind could handle it."

"What's the second option?" quizzed China eagerly.

"Well the second option is the one I'm going with. What I need you to do, miss, is to get back into the ambulance and stay put," replied Jack, before taking a deep breath and sighing loudly. China did exactly as she was told and waited impatiently to see what Jack was going to do. She was baffled to see and hear Jack praying out loud in front of the man. She couldn't fathom how exactly this was going to help the man in his condition.

When Jack had finished praying, he returned to the front of the ambulance and opened the driver's door, but didn't get in. Instead, he removed something that China couldn't see from the glove compartment and returned to the jittering wreck of a man. She watched from the back of the ambulance as Jack drew a pistol and pointed it directly at the man's forehead. She held her breath and closed her eyes. She almost jumped out of her skin from the noise of the gunshot. She opened her eyes and saw Jack take a

white cloth out of the pocket of his coat to wipe the splattered blood stains from his face, before returning to the ambulance. She couldn't bring herself to say two words to Jack for the rest of the journey. Jack also remained silent.

It was only when they had reached their destination that Jack broke the silence.

"I hope you understand, China; that man suffered a great deal before we got to him. There is no cure for anyone who has lost their mind to that extent."

China didn't wish to come across as being judgemental. She understood perfectly well that Jack came from a completely different world to hers. She couldn't explain what had happened to those people any more than he could, but she knew the circumstances behind it and drew her own conclusions. She strongly believed that what had happened to those two unfortunate souls was the result of a time travel blunder. Jack would never be able to understand her theory if she had shared it with him. China decided that it was best not to talk about the incident, which suited Jack, as he wasn't the type of man who liked to dwell on the unexplained. Jack had only one more thing to say about the matter before he dropped the subject altogether: "If it were a dog or a horse, I would have done the same thing. I had to put the poor bugger out of his misery."

"Don't worry, I completely understand why you had to do it, Jack," China responded in a reassuring tone.

Jack parked the ambulance next to two other motorised vehicles, identical to his. China noticed a large, spacious, horse-drawn wagon parked nearby, which also served as a makeshift ambulance, the type that was typical in Victorian times.

China was instructed to sit tight in the back of the ambulance, while Jack loaded the supplies. Peeking out from the back of the ambulance, she observed the large canvas tents in neat rows, which served as army hospitals. She watched as Jack disappeared into a tent and shortly emerged with two wooden crates of medical supplies in his arms. He loaded them onto the back of the ambu-

lance beside China and asked her to check their contents, while he returned to the same tent for two more loads. She sifted through the crates and found that they were packed with items, such as hospital clothing, socks, shirts, blankets and belts, as well as various types of hospital equipment, including swabs, splints, bandages and bottles of chloroform.

Satisfied that China had checked through the medical inventory for him, Jack drove them out of the camp and headed in the direction of the field hospital. The rest of the road was windy and bumpy, which made for a very uncomfortable ride in the back of the ambulance. Much to China's relief, they eventually reached their final destination for the night. Jack helped China down from the back of the ambulance and grabbed a hold of her round the waist as she slid in the mud where her feet landed.

It had been a long night for China and all she wanted to do at that moment was rest herself a while. She would try not to think too much about the day's events and would deal with the situation the following day after a good night's sleep. Her eyes were getting heavy and Jack had noticed. He guided her into the field Hospital, which, in truth, he informed her, was the old ruins of a bombed-out church, which had been converted into a makeshift hospital.

China was too tired to notice the manner in which the nurses and orderlies stared at her unusual-looking uniform. She looked different to the rest of the women, who wore long, white aprons, bearing the Red Cross emblem across the breast and long, grey dresses, which came down as far as their ankles. China certainly stood out in her grey pinafore and white cross belt.

Jack led her through a ward full of soldiers, lying stretched out on rickety beds. She didn't pass much heed on the patients as she followed Jack behind a tattered, red curtain, which divided the staff sleeping quarters from the hospital ward. As tired as she was, China couldn't help but notice the bomb damage to the back wall of the church and the large crater in the floor next to it, as well as a gaping hole in the roof above. Some nurses and orderlies were huddled on the floor with fusty-smelling blankets tucked over

them while two other nurses huddled around a makeshift campfire for warmth.

One of the nurses fetched two tin cups and filled them with water from a large metal can on a table in the corner of the room. She approached China first and smiled warmly as she handed her a cup before approaching Jack with the other cup. China sat down on the cold, hard floor to drink the water. She had been parched with the thirst and gulped it down. Jack threw a blanket in her direction and told her to get cosy for the night. China wasn't amused and wondered how it was even possible for a person to sleep in such squalor conditions.

As she lay down on the floor, China noticed a procession of lice crawling along the floor in the direction of a leather boot, which was lying next to her head. She quickly sat back up, which gave Jack the impression that she wanted to chat for a while. His voice was soft as he spoke, not wanting to wake the others that slept nearby.

In an effort to sweeten the nurse's dreams, he decided against talking about the war and instead chatted pleasantly about the plans he had made for after the war. Turning his gaze to China, he told her about the superstition regarding the statue of the Madonna and Child, which was still barely hanging from the church tower in Albert. He said everyone believed that when the Madonna and Child fell to the ground, the war would finally be over. He half-heartedly joked that he was going to travel back to Albert in the morning and knock it over himself.

Upon hearing his humorous plan, China lay back down on the filthy floor and pulled the blanket about her shoulders. Having realised that she was stuck in 1916, she hadn't the heart to tell Jack that the war wouldn't end until 1918. With that thought in mind to spoil her dreams, she closed her eyes for the last time that night. Surprisingly, she managed to fall easily into a deep sleep.

When she awoke in the morning, China felt that she had slept for a very long time. It took her a moment to take in her surroundings, before she remembered where she was. She was still feeling

confused from the previous day's events and worried that the Red Cross would find it difficult to locate her. It was six o'clock in the morning and the sun was literally shining down upon her, through the hole in the roof. Jack was nowhere to be found and having enquired about him, China was told that he had left earlier that morning to transport a number of wounded soldiers back to the casualty clearing station.

To the side of the main staff quarters was a white curtain, which China hadn't noticed the night before. When she ventured behind the curtain, she could see that it was a primitive excuse for a surgical theatre. There were trestles in the centre of the area for holding stretchers. To the side wall, just beneath an enormous, colourful, stained-glass window depicting religious imagery, was a cupboard that held sterilised dressings, equipment, bowls, overalls, towels and antiseptic lotions. There were two benches propped up against the adjacent wall with a shelf above each. The shelves were stacked with large, two-pound bottles of chloroform, saline solutions, bandages, masks, gauze, splints and surgical instruments of various kinds.

China pulled back the red, tatty curtain that led out onto the ward and drew a deep breath as she looked around at all the sorry-looking faces of the sick and wounded soldiers who stared back at her. This was her reality now and she knew she had much work to do. If she was destined to play a part in the First World War, she decided that she had better pitch in and start pulling her weight. She started by reporting to the Matron in charge and listened carefully as she was given her orders. Although she wasn't a trained nurse, China had enough basic first aid skills to get her by: another perk of being home-schooled by her grandfather. She was eager and willing to learn anything that she could and carefully observed the nurses and orderlies around her as they went about their duties.

As a new recruit, China's training commenced at a basic level to start with. She began her duties by scrubbing and sterilising the hospital floor, which turned out to be back-breaking work. When

she had finished cleaning the floor, China helped another nurse to sterilise a number of unusual surgical tools, which she had yet to learn the names of. She watched closely as an orderly instructed her on how to clean and dress infectious wounds. She also got first-hand experience as she learned how to treat a soldier who had suffered from a first-degree burn to his face as a result of a bomb blast.

Luckily for China, she was a quick learner and didn't suffer from a weak stomach. The sight of blood didn't make her feel queasy and the gaping wounds she observed didn't bother her much, but that wasn't to say that she didn't feel real horror at witnessing some of the most brutal injuries and wounds that she had ever seen. It was one thing to read about the horrors of war, but it was another thing entirely to come face-to-face with the harsh reality of it in the cold light of day. She began to consider how hard it sometimes was for other people to imagine how soldiers and civilians suffered during wars in the past. It was easy to learn about it from a safe distance in time, but to have the opportunity to witness it was the biggest learning curve of all. She had real compassion for the sick and wounded soldiers and seemed to easily throw herself into her work, which aided in distracting her from the fact that she was lost in time.

By the time the afternoon came, China was totally exhausted. She hadn't stopped to eat anything all day and felt a little light-headed. Not surprisingly, there wasn't that much to eat. The nurses and orderlies pretty much ate exactly what the soldiers ate. She had to force herself to drink the tasteless soup and eat the half-stale bread that was provided, otherwise she would have gone hungry. After a quick break outside in the sunshine, chatting to a soldier on crutches, she returned to the ward to continue her duties. She had been asked by the Matron to help the soldiers write some letters and postcards to their loved ones at home. It was a surreal task to actually write letters and postcards in her own handwriting, knowing that they would be posted in 1916, three hundred years before she was born! It was a very enjoyable task

and acted as a bit of therapy for China herself, as she got chatting to the soldiers on the ward. She enjoyed getting to know them by name, sharing their stories and jokes, while having the pleasure of hearing about their backgrounds and learning all about their families.

Her happy task was short lived as an ambulance arrived with new casualties straight from the frontline. The stretcher-bearers carried the men into the ward in a hasty fashion and laid them out where they could. Some were lucky enough to get beds while others had to make do with wooden boards laid out on the floor, covered over by blankets. The men were moaning and reeling with pain as blood oozed from their wounds. It was mostly shrapnel wounds that the nurses had to tend to and China did her best to assist her fellow staff.

At first China was too busy hurrying about fetching bandages and basins of clean water to notice the last man who was brought in. He lay on the floor writhing in pain from a shrapnel wound to his abdomen, which meant it was highly unlikely that he would survive. It was his turn to have his wound cleaned and China arrived by his side with fresh bandages and a basin of water.

It was only when she came face-to-face with the soldier that she realised something was completely out of place. She dropped the basin of water onto the floor out of sheer shock, smashing it into tiny pieces, adding to the chaos around her. The Matron was furious at the sight of it and embarrassed to boot, as the doctor-on-duty was present at the time. China couldn't help but stand motionless, staring at the soldier, ignoring his painful cries. Two other nurses came rushing to his side, one of them asking China what on earth it was that had gotten into her. China continued to glare at the soldier with her mouth open. She was staring at his uniform; it was grey, which indicated that he was a German soldier, an enemy. There was nothing so unusual about that; enemy soldiers were sometimes treated in Allied hospitals before being forwarded to prisoner of war camps. No, that wasn't the reason for China's distress. She continued to study his uniform to make sure

that she wasn't making a mistake, but there was no mistaking the Nazi symbol of the winged eagle on the breast pocket of his jacket or the swastika pinned to his shoulder. This soldier belonged to World War II and no one around her seemed to have a clue. This soldier was in the wrong war.



CHAPTER 6

EASY WAY OUT



China's eyes were fixed on the swastika sewn into the Nazi's uniform, as the bulky lump of a Matron dragged her away roughly by the arm. Although the Matron's tight grip was hurting her, China didn't struggle; she was still in shock. The rest of the nurses and orderlies watched on with sympathetic looks, thankful that they were not in China's shoes.

"I really hope you have one hell of a good explanation for your incompetence, young lady." The Matron practically spat the words out as she forcefully dragged China into the staff quarters and yanked the red curtains behind her, all the while squeezing the life out of China's arm.

In her confusion, China made a poor attempt at explaining herself.

"You don't realise, Matron ... he ... he doesn't belong here! ... I don't belong here! ... It's the wrong war!"

This only served to vex the Matron even more and she shook China hard, telling her to quickly start making some sense.

China went on to explain further, "There's been a mistake. I volunteered to be sent to another war, the war between the International Armed Forces and the United Citizens Army." Just at

that moment, China screamed out and fell to her knees, holding onto the wrist containing the microchip. The Matron had no choice but to let China's arm loose and stared hard at her before shouting about how ridiculous and stupid she was beginning to sound. China's wrist was burning with pain. She didn't dare mention another word about the war, which she was supposed to have volunteered for. It was obvious that this wasn't a permitted topic for discussion and so she promptly changed her tune. She apologised to the Matron and told her that she hadn't been feeling very well all day. The Matron responded rather harshly by saying how it was hard enough to cope with sick and wounded soldiers, without having to deal with a mentally ill nurse. She dismissed China from her duties for the rest of the day. This was a welcome opportunity for China to sit a while and gather her thoughts. She hopped out over the crumbling ruins of the back wall of the church into the fresh air and sat down on a rock in the grass, her back against a stack of empty medical supply crates.

The Matron's bad humour wasn't a priority to China, as her mind struggled to piece together the events of the last two days. She thought about the two Red Cross volunteers that she had stumbled across the previous night and how they too had become lost in time. She wondered how the Red Cross could make such a mistake. Surely there must be more volunteers like her who got lost along the way. She reckoned that the Red Cross would have sent out a search party for them by now. Then her thoughts turned back to the Nazi soldier. She guessed that he also had somehow become lost in time, but she couldn't fathom how. What did a soldier from the Second World War have to do with a group of Red Cross volunteers who belonged to a future war? And how did they come to land in the middle of the First World War? Nothing seemed to add up in China's mind.

The nightmarish journey she had endured in the strange, sphere-shaped telepod was the last thought in China's mind when she felt a sharp blow to the back of the head. She turned around fast enough to see the Matron throwing thick, hardback books at

her through the gap in the wall and managed to avoid being hit again by ducking her head.

“Being off-duty during a war does not warrant being idle!” the Matron shouted at her in an enraged tone.

Not wishing to irritate the Matron any further, China turned away from her and began to pick up the books, which were strewn about the grass all around her. She could see that they were all medical journals and concluded that it would be a wise idea to spend the rest of the afternoon studying them.

There were five medical journals in total, the thinnest of them consisting of over three hundred pages. The benefit of having a photographic memory and a built-in quantum hard-drive system was that it allowed China to quickly scan and retain every morsel of information from each journal. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken any other person months of studying to acquire such volumes of knowledge, yet it had taken China only two hours. Within such a short space of time, she had learned all she needed to know to continue practicing as a nurse. She knew the name of all types of medical equipment and could visually recognise surgical tools, knowing exactly what they were used for. She had learned of countless medical procedures and knew the correct dosage of all existing medication to be administered in any given circumstance. Of course, the Matron would never have believed that China had learned so much in such a small amount of time and so she thought it wise to hold onto the journals for a while, being seen to pore over them from time to time.

After she had finished reading the last journal, she gathered up the books into her arms in a neat pile and carried them under her chin, stepping back into the staff quarters through the gap in the wall at the back of the ruined church. She stacked the books onto the bookcase in the corner of the room and passed through the red curtain onto the hospital ward. She slowly walked the length of the ward, watching the nurses and orderlies tending to their duties and caring for their patients. There was no sign of the Matron, much to China’s relief. She approached the Nazi soldier and was

surprised to see that he was still alive and laid out on the floor. She kneeled on the rough, wooden beams of the floor beside him and watched his chest move up and down with each wheezing breath he took. His eyes were closed and he was jerking about in a fretful manner from an infectious fever. It was obvious by the wrinkled expression on his face that he was in much pain and distress. China could see that the blood from his wound was seeping right through his bandages. She asked a passing nurse if there was anything more that could be done for the soldier, but she was informed that the doctor had just administered a second and final dose of morphine and that it was just a matter of time before he would pass away. China was upset that no more could be done to save the soldier and disappointed that she wouldn't have the chance to ask him how he ended up in the wrong time and place. She didn't speak German, but she had rather hoped that he may have spoken a little English.

China never got to find out if the Nazi soldier had any English, as he died ten minutes later. She guessed that he would be buried with the rest of the dead soldiers in the military cemetery to the back of the casualty clearing station. The cemetery had been established from the onset of the war and had grown day by day, accommodating thousands of men, both young and old, but mostly young.

China stood up and walked towards the large, arched doors of the converted church. She was in a melancholy mood. The Nazi soldier would take his secrets to the grave and she would never know his story. This was the first time she had witnessed a man dying and she was certain that it wouldn't be the last.

The rumble of artillery and shells erupted in the distance as China stepped outside to get some air. She stood and leaned against the wall with her hands behind her back and her eyes closed, thinking about her brother. The thought had just struck her that all these soldiers were someone's husband, son or brother. The emotions that she had experienced since her arrival were not something that she could have ever learned from history books.

Sensing a dark shadow in front of her, which had suddenly blocked out the light, China immediately opened her eyes and was surprised to see Jack standing before her. She hadn't heard him come creeping up towards her. He had picked three daisies from the grassy verge along the path and began to fix them in China's hair, to one side of her head. She was a little flustered at first and then laughed at the childishness of it.

"A smile at last." Jack spoke very softly. "You were looking quite serious and lost in your thoughts just now. So, tell me how your first day at work went."

China frowned and sighed out loud before she could bring herself to speak.

"It didn't go too well I'm afraid, Jack. The Matron had words with me ..."

China was forced to stop talking due to the lump forming in her throat.

"Well, it sounds to me like you could do with a shoulder to cry on. I could make you a cup of tea, but I recommend something a little stronger."

Jack smiled warmly at her and led her by the arm towards his ambulance, which was parked around the side of the church. He had just travelled back from Albert after spending most of the day transporting wounded soldiers from the front to an advanced dressing station located nearby. The dressing station was so close to the front that it was exposed to artillery fire and was often bombarded. Jack told China how the ambulance had a near miss earlier that day as a shell exploded close by, when the stretcher-bearers were unloading patients. He said that he was glad to be given the task of transporting more patients further afield later that afternoon, to a base hospital in Albert. His duties for the night, however, were to deliver more medical supplies to the casualty clearing station where China was stationed and to remain there on standby for the rest of the night.

It had just started to rain when Jack helped China up into the back of the ambulance and hopped up behind her. He spread a blanket out on the floor for her to sit on and lifted a canvas cover-

ing, which lay draped across the top of a wooden crate. Inside the crate were a number of bottles, mostly chloroform, morphine and two bottles of brandy. It was one of the bottles of brandy that Jack reached for. The bottle had already been opened and was half-empty. He sat down beside China, reached his hand into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket and produced a clean handkerchief, which he used to dust two small shot glasses that he pulled out of his satchel. The satchel was where he kept his personal items: his pay book, identity papers, shaving kit, soap and a framed picture of his wife and two young children.

China held the shot glasses while Jack poured the brandy. He said that even though the brandy was there for medicinal purposes, he thought that it was necessary at this moment in time and would help to settle her nerves.

After her second brandy, China began to relax a little and shared the day's events with Jack, who was happy to listen and offer his support. She had told him of her run-in with the Matron and about how she had little choice but to spend the afternoon with her head stuck in books. She spoke about the German soldier who had died, but failed to mention that he belonged to another time and place. How would Jack possibly comprehend what it was to time travel? It would be a completely alien term to him. Besides, she hadn't forgotten the burning sensation she got in her wrist earlier that day when she spoke about the war she had volunteered for: a mighty war that reared its ugly head because of time travel.

Jack was a great listener and a huge comfort to China. He leaned forward as she spoke of her humiliation by the Matron and gently rested her head on his shoulder. He played with the wisps of curls that had fallen about her face, from where her hair was pinned up on the crown of her head. He told her that she was wise not to give the Matron any grief and to have kept her head down to study for the afternoon. He said that he admired her for her compassion towards the dying German soldier, even if he was the enemy, and mentioned that she had many qualities that reminded him of his younger sister. When China heard him make a compar-

ison between her and his sister, she began to feel more at ease with him, as although she enjoyed his company, she didn't want him to think that she had any romantic feelings for him. As the rain started to teem down upon the roof of the ambulance, China began to feel somewhat cosy and safe, making it easier to share her burdens with Jack.

It was Jack's guess that what upset China the most was having to watch a patient die for the very first time. He brought the conversation to a close by reminding her that they were all destined to die someday, there was no easy way out for anyone and that it was simply a matter of time. On this sombre note, Jack lunged towards the bottle of brandy and poured another glass for her. As he began to top up his own glass, he heard a man's voice roaring out his name, accompanied by the sound of a fist pounding on the side of the ambulance, and he managed to spill brandy all over the blanket underneath them. Jack sprang to his feet and jumped out from the back of the ambulance. China popped her head out for a look at the man who was breathless and slightly doubled over, leaning on Jack's shoulder for support. He was panting as he spoke.

"Jack, you ... you better come quickly ... We need more transport for the men at the front." He was gasping for breath and China could tell by the medical emblem and stripes on his shoulder that he was a medical officer with the Royal Army Medical Corps. When he stood up straight next to Jack, China could see how much taller than Jack he was. He had sandy hair, which was cut tight and neat; he was clean shaven and had remarkably straight teeth. All China could look at when he spoke were his unusually perfect-looking teeth.

"The men are being slaughtered ... and there aren't enough ambulances or stretcher-bearers to deal with the onslaught," the officer added. His gaze turned towards China and still panting, he said, "You may bring her with you. We could do with all the help we can get."

Jack glanced at China and hesitated for a moment before he

ran to the driver's seat. It was unheard of for women to go anywhere near the frontline; the closest they usually got to the action was the nearest dressing station. Jack was aware of the dangers, but he also considered the needs of the wounded men. Having been to the front several times before, Jack could see that the benefit of bringing a nurse along for the ride far outweighed the dangers.

The officer jumped into the back of the ambulance with China after he had handed Jack a map and given him directions. China began to feel a little alarmed as she had seen images of the frontline before and read the most gruesome accounts of men who had experienced first-hand what it was like to live and fight in the trenches: men who were honoured for surviving the war, but who should also have been decorated for surviving the trenches themselves.

The ride to the front was bumpy and uncomfortable, which wasn't helped by the fact that Jack was driving at tremendous speed for a vehicle of its time. The closer they got to the front, the louder the pounding of the shells sounded. China was astounded by the whistling noise that cut through the air and the thunderous explosions that rocked the ground all around them. It was a surreal and deeply frightening experience to be driving directly towards the thick of it all.

The time had come for the trio to abandon the ambulance a short distance from the frontline and make the rest of the way by foot. Slinging a first aid bag across her shoulder, China stepped out onto the barren, mucky ground for the first time. Jack and the medical officer, whose name China discovered was Frank Miller, carried two stretchers, a canvas bag containing medical instruments, equipment and medication, as well as two cases of bandages and gauze between them.

It was starting to get dark, which added to the terror of the situation. The night sky was lit up with red and green flares soaring above the trenches, as the artillery and shells hammered through the atmosphere. The smell of earth and smoke hit China's nostrils

as they waded clumsily through the wet mud and water-logged shell holes that scarred the landscape around them for miles. They passed the second line of defence and headed for the first line. When she wasn't looking at the messy, pock-marked ground, guiding her step through the obstacle course that surrounded her, she attempted to look up and catch glimpses of the soldiers running frantically about like an army of ants, each one a part of the bigger picture. She could see the frontline ahead, soldiers leaning on the fire step of the trench taking their aim, other soldiers launching shell and artillery attacks. They were so close to the action that not only could she see the barbed wire marking the start of No Man's Land for the British and French lines, but she could also see the wire on the far side, which guarded the German trenches.

Officer Miller was the first to crawl down backwards into the trenches via a wooden ladder. He stood waiting for China to make her way down so that he could guide her to safety, followed by Jack. The trench was a little over six feet high, four feet wide and lit up in places by oil lamps and candles. To China, the trench resembled a deep drain dug into a field; for that was exactly what it was. The sides of the trench were partially lined with wooden boards and there had been some obvious attempt at laying duck boards in places along the ground, with muddy puddles here and there where there were gaps in the boards. There was a fire step cut into the side of the trench facing the Germans, for the soldiers to line up and shoot from. The parapet at the top of the trench, above the fire step, was lined with wooden planks and sandbags to stop the enemy's bullets from targeting the soldiers' heads. The first thing that Officer Miller did before he allowed China and Jack to take another step was to warn them about keeping their heads down, well below the parapet.

"One mistake is all it takes to end up with a hole in your head," he warned them in a matter-of-fact manner.

The rain poured down in buckets and steam rose from the barrels of the soldier's rifles as they fired out into the darkness.

The flares lit up the night sky as the shells exploded and the artillery ripped up the wet, summer-night air. The weather was appalling for this time of year and added to the squalor conditions of the trenches. As they walked along the line, they passed soldiers of all shapes, sizes and ages, men from all walks of life. Some were busy firing their rifles, others were loading shells. The odd few soldiers were leaning back against the fire step, resting themselves, eating their rations from a mess tin or smoking. A few soldiers were huddled on the ground here and there in a state of shock, raving and chattering to themselves, clearly not in a fit state to fight.

As they walked on, they treaded further and further into the depths of hell. The duck boards had long disappeared and they were making their way through a quagmire of muddy puddles, their boots sticking in the mud as they sloshed about, half falling over at times. Some of the soldiers, who were not occupied by shooting, were beginning to stare at China, making her feel uncomfortable. One soldier was rude enough to spit in her presence as he spat out a piece of chewed-up tobacco in front of her, before eyeing her up like a piece of juicy meat. Officer Miller was leading them to a dugout, down the line, where he was hoping to establish a regimental aid post of sorts. It wasn't common to have a dugout located in the frontline or firing trench. It was usually more common to find dugouts located along the second line, or support line, as it was sometimes referred to.

As she tripped over something hard, China looked down at the ground and realised that it was a dead soldier lying face-down in the mud. He had obviously just been shot in the head. Jack was directly behind her and bent down to pick up the soldier's Lee Enfield rifle, figuring that the soldier would no longer have any use for it. He slung the rifle over his shoulder and carried on plodding along in the mud. Through the noise and racket of the artillery around them, China could make out the faint squeaking noise of an animal of some description and upon looking to her left, she came face-to-face with three large rats scaling the walls of the

trench. She was beginning to realise that if the bombs and bullets didn't kill a man, filth and disease would do the job.

The further along the line they went, the more corpses they had to trail across. The majority of soldiers were far too busy firing their arms to take any notice of their comrades piling up about their ankles. Their path along the trenches so far hadn't revealed any casualties that they could actually assist; the men were either shooting, resting or already dead.

At last they came to a widening of the trench where the dugout was positioned. There was a narrow wooden doorway, which led to an underground bunker. The floor of the bunker was concrete, as was the roof, which was further reinforced by sandbags and earth. The room, which smelled of dampness and cordite, was lit by acetylene lamps. In the centre of the bunker were trestles to support stretchers, while two benches were positioned at the back. The bunker was furnished with tables and shelves for storing bottles, dressings and medical instruments. Off to one side of the bunker were a set of bunks to accommodate a medical officer and up to two orderlies or assistants. On the opposite side of the room there were slides, which could hold up to three stretcher patients at a time. Curtains separated the bunks and tiered stretchers from the centre of the room, while a gas-proof curtain was rolled up near the door, ready for use in the event of a gas attack. On the floor, close to the exit, lay an oxygen cylinder and some bottles of anti-gas solution.

"Miss Winter, I will need you to unpack the medical supplies and stock the shelves. Jack, you can help me search for casualties along the lines. We will have to wait until things die down before we can go out with the stretcher-bearers to collect the wounded men in No Man's Land."

Officer Miller spoke in a calm, orderly fashion as if it were all second nature to him. But China could tell by the reaction on Jack's face that he hadn't expected to be dragged out into No Man's Land. His work with the motor ambulance convoys meant that his duties normally consisted of transporting casualties from

one of the main dressing stations to the nearby casualty clearing station. He was usually not so close to the action. It was the job of those who worked with the field ambulances, who were responsible for transporting casualties from the advanced dressing stations near the frontline to the main dressing stations.

Officer Miller made for the door with a stretcher under one arm. He waited in the doorway for Jack to lift the other end of the stretcher and accompany him out into the trench. Jack took the rifle he had been carrying off his shoulder and held it out in front of China. He showed her the sharp bayonet jutting out from the top of the rifle and warned her that she was to use it if necessary, on any soldier who tried it on with her. He said that although he didn't want to scare her, he wanted her to be aware that the majority of these soldiers hadn't been with a woman in months. They were half-starved and half-crazed out of their minds from the effects of war and some of them would think nothing of taking advantage if they found her alone. He placed the strap of the rifle over China's head and positioned it to the back of her. Before he made his way to the door, he gently cupped one of China's cheeks in his hand and said, "This is no place for a lady." As he passed through the doorway, he took a moment to glance back at China and gave her a friendly wink before disappearing outside of the bunker.

China wasn't happy to be left alone in the bunker with the image that Jack had just placed in her mind. These soldiers were not the enemy and yet she didn't feel safe being around them after what he had told her. It was a little awkward for her to unpack the medical supplies with a heavy rifle strapped to her back, but she dared not take it off and carried on with the task at hand as best she could. From time to time she could feel the ground beneath her shake due to the heavy bombardment of the fields above the ceiling of the bunker. Every time a shell landed nearby, earth and gravel would spill down from the ceiling.

When she had finished preparing the bunker for the arrival of casualties, she sat down on a bench at the back wall and tried to

distract her mind from her present circumstances by taking out her grandfather's compass from her pocket. She had decided that she would carry it on her person at all times and held onto the belief that someday she would return it to her brother. Looking down at the cracked glass, China was baffled to see that the needle of the compass was spinning about wildly. It would spin furiously in one direction, then stop a moment and spin backwards with as much speed. She had never known a compass to behave like this before and stared hard at it, trying to work out what it was that could interfere with it and cause such wild fluctuations. Her thoughts were broken by the sound of a man's heavy boots stamping in her direction from the doorway. She looked up, slipping the compass back into her pocket at the same time. The soldier, a man in his late fifties with grey hair and a matching grey moustache, stood to attention inside the doorway of the bunker, staring at China through wild, green eyes. The soldier's uniform was a great deal smarter-looking than most and she could tell from the man's stance and the stripes and decorations on his tunic that he was definitely of a higher rank than the majority of soldiers that she had come by. He continued to stare wildly at her and slowly looked her up and down from head to toe, taking her all in, before he spoke in a gruff voice.

"Well, what have we got ourselves here?"

His eyes were still wild as he gazed upon her and she reached a hand around behind her and touched the rifle for reassurance.

"I say, it's not every day I come across a pretty young thing like yourself all alone in a bunker like this."

It was obvious from his upper-class, British accent that he was a well-educated man. China was feeling a little anxious. She didn't like the way he looked at her or the fact that he had referred to her as a 'pretty young thing'. She didn't speak, but stood up and gripped the rifle tighter behind her back.

"I say," the soldier continued, "I wasn't aware that they issued nurses with Lee Enfields these days. Ah well, anything goes, I suppose ... Yes ... yes ... anything goes."

China's heart began to race a little as the soldier smiled and began to approach her. China had never harmed another soul in her life and she didn't know how she would bear to thrust the sharp blade at the top of the rifle into the flesh of the man walking towards her. She would let him get a little closer before deciding what to do. Her hands began to shake. He stopped and stood close to her, taking the time to look her up and down again, and held out a hand towards her.

"The name's General Darby. Damn pleased to meet you, young lady."

He continued to hold his hand out in mid-air, waiting for her to shake it. She was still trembling a little when she reached out a hand towards him. His grip was firm, like his stance.

"I wonder if you could be of some assistance to me. I have a wounded lieutenant further up the line. I was rather hoping I could get a stretcher up to him, but we seem to be a little short of stretchers at present."

China's heart began to slow to a more regular pace as she realised that his intentions were not a threat to her.

The general continued to speak: "I wonder if you would accompany me down the line to tend to his wounds, Miss ...? Miss ...?"

"Oh, my name is Miss Winter," China answered, relieved that she wouldn't have to maim the man with the bayonet behind her back. China consented to treating the wounded lieutenant and quickly gathered up some medical supplies, which she put into a satchel and slung over one shoulder, all the while still carrying the rifle on her back.

General Darby led the way through the swamp-like gutter of a trench in the opposite direction to that which Jack and Officer Miller had taken. It was still raining heavily and the skies up above were being ripped apart by shells and artillery. The enemy had started a barrage of machine-gun fire, which was adding to the violent acoustics. The general reminded China several times to keep her head down as they passed by the odd gap in the sandbags on the parapet.

As she trudged along in the mud, China could hardly believe her eyes at the sight of corpses strewn this way and that, right along the line. The rest of the soldiers had no choice but to continue fighting and holding the line. She watched young boys, no older than fifteen, and men of various ages, falling over the lifeless bodies of their comrades as they struggled to fire their rifles at their targets without getting hit in the process.

The trench was long and winding, full of waste materials, including empty tins and scraps of discarded food. The rats could clearly be seen scavenging through the rubbish and dead bodies, which made the stench unbearable at times. The smell of putrid rot was stinging the back of China's nose, but her stomach only began to turn as she passed by the latrine. It was obvious from the ravaged state of the soldiers that the living conditions were taking a toll on their health. The majority hadn't washed or changed their clothes for weeks on end and were riddled with lice. A number of soldiers along the way were lying or sitting in puddles of mud, clearly injured, but still alive. China had no choice but to stick to the practice of triage, which she had witnessed back at the casualty clearing station, when doctors and nurses would pass down a line of wounded men, tending first to the more serious cases.

As they turned the next corner of the trench, the general came to a sudden halt. China was horrified to see yet another dead body lying at the general's feet.

"I say ..." the general muttered, looking down at the lifeless corpse beneath him. "Looks like it's too late to save this poor old chap. Sweet dreams, Lieutenant Williams."

China was very disappointed that they had made a wasted journey, especially when they had passed by so many men that could have done with her assistance.

The part of the trench in which they were standing was a small, secluded section, which was presently unoccupied by soldiers. There was a gap in the trench at the parapet above the fire step, where China guessed that the lieutenant had been shot. He was lying on his back, facing upwards, with his eyes wide open and a

severe wound to the head. His tunic was saturated with blood and it was obvious from the pool of dark red seeping out from under him that he had haemorrhaged to death. China doubted that the lieutenant would have lasted more than a few minutes after being shot and she guessed that he was probably well dead by the time the general had come to look for her. The general was staring at China again with his wild eyes, not saying a word, which was beginning to unnerve her once more. She wondered if the old man was a little senile from the way he stared intensely at times without speaking. She pondered what was going on in his mind as he continued to stare at her.

"What now?" enquired China in a nervous tone, hoping that the general would say something normal to put her at ease once again, but the man continued to stare at her without uttering a word. "I should probably be getting back to the bunker," China said, as she switched the heavy satchel over from one shoulder to another.

"Not so fast, young lady," responded the general as he grabbed her by the wrist. "I shall escort you back soon, Miss Winter, but I'd like a little diversion first."

With that, the general smiled at China and reached for something in the inside pocket of his tunic. China watched as he took out a pipe, already stuffed with tobacco, and a card of matches. He led China by the arm to sit on the fire step and proceeded to light his pipe. China couldn't help but feel shocked that the trenches were being so heavily bombarded and yet the general could take the time to smoke his pipe. Looking up at the heavens, China sat and watched the display unfolding above her head. Red and green flares illuminated the sky, interspersed with glowing flashes of light from the artillery and machine guns. If it were not for the fact that she was sitting in the thick of the First World War, China would have found the sight almost breath-taking.

The general continued to stare at China and when he had finished his pipe and was tucking it back into the inside pocket of his tunic, China stood up to make a start back towards the bunker.

The general suddenly made a dart for China, grabbing her by the shoulders, and landing her down on the ground in a puddle of sludge. The rain was pelting down on them and the general was lying directly on top of her as her skirt had hitched itself up her thigh on one side. This time she was the one staring wildly into the general's eyes and started to scream as she struggled to get up.

"I say, Miss Winter, haven't you been warned about the snipers? I told you to keep your head down, young lady." The general was almost shouting and was so annoyed with China that he ended up falling over. He suddenly turned his gaze away from her to witness the multitude of machine-gun bullets that were blasting great big holes in the sandbags behind them where China's head had been in full view through the gap in the trench. China immediately stopped screaming and struggling. She was astounded at her own stupidity and felt somewhat embarrassed. She ached from where she fell upon the rifle strapped to her back. The general stood up and quickly dusted himself down as best he could, before lifting China back up onto her feet. They were standing a few feet away from the gap in the trench, as they both gazed upon the sandbags, which had almost been shot away to pieces. It was a wake-up call for China. Every minute she spent trapped in this hell was a hazard. She had never wanted to volunteer for military duty in the first place and now she found herself in the middle of one of the bloodiest wars in history, right on the frontline with a rifle strapped to her back. This wasn't how she had envisioned her future to be.

"There's a damn good reason why we don't allow women on the frontline," the general declared as he stood himself up straight, adjusted his collar and dusted off his shoulders. "I think you will need me as a chaperon, Miss Winter." The general winked at China before pulling and straightening his moustache. He went on to tell her that he had a daughter back home who was roughly the same age as her. "She's a clumsy sort, always getting herself into bother ... That's the damn trouble with women; they're all clumsy," the general declared in an insensitive manner.

China was getting slightly irritated by the general's attitude towards women, but decided that it would be wise to bite her tongue.

As the general rambled on about his views on a woman's place, China began to tune out of the conversation. She could feel a distinct change in the atmosphere. All of a sudden, a rush of warm air seemed to wash over her and she could have sworn that she felt something solid brushing up against her. She was paying absolutely no attention to the ravings of the old general and all her senses were on high alert. Then she heard whispering to one side of her head, despite the fact that there was no one else around.

"Why is there a woman here? She doesn't belong here," a disembodied voice began to murmur.

China's head swung about in all directions, but she couldn't find the source of the whispering.

"Do you think she can hear us?" the whispering continued. "Do you think she can see us?"

A second voice replied, in a deeper tone, "No, she can't see us. She shouldn't be here. This is no place for a woman."

It sounded to China like two men having a conversation and even though they were whispering, she could clearly make out what they were saying. It seemed as if they were standing right next to her and yet the general was the only other person present. The more she frantically looked about for the source, the softer the whispering became until the words themselves were inaudible. The general was of course oblivious to the voices as he was too busy twittering on to himself. Then the whispering seemed to cease. The general subsequently suggested that he escort China back to the bunker. But before she got the chance to turn around, something strange caught the corner of her eye. A small portion of the sky, which she happened to be facing, seemed to brighten considerably and transform from darkness into daylight. The temperature seemed to rise significantly, as if it were the middle of a hot summer's day. Directly behind the general, a man in a completely different uniform to those China was familiar with

seemed to materialise from thin air. He stood looking in China's direction for a moment, before turning to the side and walking straight through the embankment of the trench, disappearing into it, just as a ghost would walk through a wall. China could scarcely believe her eyes.

The general noticed her gaping at something behind him, with her mouth wide open. He swung around hard, just in time to see another oddly dressed soldier materialise from out of nowhere and walk right through the embankment of the trench. The general turned back towards China, but didn't seem at all fazed by what he had just witnessed.

"Damn Yankees are back again," he muttered with the same wild eyes and senile look on his face that China had seen before.

"Yankees?" quizzed China with a puzzled brow. China observed two more soldiers materialise and subsequently disappear into the trench in the exact same location as the previous two.

"Civil War soldiers," explained the General. "It's the Confederates who cause the most trouble, you know."

"Civil War soldiers? As in the American Civil War of the eighteen fifties?" questioned China, intrigued by the implications. "But that's impossible."

"Most excellent marksmen and highly skilled in the use of cannon," the general declared as he took a few slippery steps in the mud towards China, so he could lead her back along the line. China was at a standstill, facing the general. She couldn't bring herself to move from the spot where she stood, as she was still trying to take it all in.

"But how is it even possible to be fighting alongside Civil War soldiers?" probed China.

"Oh, you'd be surprised, my dear, what goes on in these parts of the trenches. I've been around for a long time, you know ... I've been through the wars as they say!" The general gave a dry laugh and carried on. "I've fought all my life ... and long after it, you know. Nothing will ever kill me."

Just as he uttered his last few words, China spotted a man

standing high above the level of their heads on the parapet, dressed in an unusual type of grey military uniform, brandishing a rifle and pointing it at the side of the general's head. The soldier, whom China guessed to be a Confederate, blew a hole in the side of the general's head. Thick drops of blood splattered onto China's face. She screamed with revulsion and tried to run as fast as was possible in the murky, wet conditions. A second bullet ricocheted off a sandbag to the side of her head as she turned the corner of the trench. The soldier was following her path from the parapet above her head and seemed to gain a position ahead of her. He stood still, his rifle cocked at China, with one eye closed as he focused on his target. Without warning, the bayonet from a Lee Enfield rifle plunged directly through the stomach of the soldier with incredible force. The British soldier who had just saved her life nodded in a respectful manner at her and then proceeded to remove his weapon from the torso of the dead Confederate, causing him to drop into the trench at China's feet like a dead fly. It was all too much for her to cope with and the shock propelled her to move her legs quickly away from the scene, as she slid, scurried and lunged over obstacles in her path. Eventually, she fell face-down on something hard and found to her compete horror that she was face-to-face with the rotted, maggot-infested remains of a British soldier. She yelled out at the top of her voice before passing out with shock.

Although she appeared outwardly to be unconscious, China was immersed in the deep inner workings of her own mind. Her mind seemed to travel back to her grandfather's workshop where she was able to watch herself working away, repairing an old television set for a customer. She watched her brother step through the doorway and sneak up behind her, hugging her tightly from behind. She heard her name being called and turned to see her idol, Nikola Tesla, smiling warmly at her and holding out a pocket watch. He called her name repeatedly and then her mind went blank before she slowly opened her eyes.

Although she was gaining consciousness again, she was slow to

make out her surroundings and felt confused. She could still hear her name being called. Her eyes focused on the man standing over her, calling her name. It wasn't Tesla calling her, but Jack. She sat up suddenly and realised that she was back in the bunker, lying on a stretcher. Jack had a worried look on his face and immediately began to question her about what had happened. He was angry at her for leaving the bunker when he had told her to stay put.

As she sipped sweet tea from a tin cup, she began to tell Jack about the general that had asked for her help and the lieutenant, who was already dead by the time she got to him. She didn't bother to relay all the gory details and she certainly didn't mention the Civil War soldiers that she had seen or how the general had come to be shot. She had realised earlier from what the general had said that he was aware of the other soldiers who had somehow travelled through time to fight another war. It was clear to her, though, that Jack didn't even know what the concept of time travel was and she didn't wish to frighten him by revealing it to him. What puzzled her further was how some people were aware of time travellers while others were not. The general had said that he had fought all his life and after it. She wondered what exactly he had meant by such a statement.

It didn't take China long to come back round to her senses and she quickly realised that her assistance was urgently needed. The bunker was filled to capacity with casualties. All the stretchers were occupied by injured men, which left a great number of men lying stretched out on the floor, taking up any available space. Officer Miller was occupied with one soldier in particular, who had numerous shrapnel wounds to his leg and arm on one side of his body. Jack and other army medics were scurrying around frantically, tending to the worst cases first. It was up to China to use her own initiative and pitch in where she could.

Most of the injuries were of a similar nature and China was busy for some time, cleaning and dressing wounds as well as applying splints where necessary. Many soldiers, who had been issued with a personal supply of bandages tucked away in the

inside pocket of their tunics, attempted to apply their own dressings before they had arrived at the bunker. As soon as Officer Miller was free, he speedily assessed the situation of the new casualties as they arrived, giving China a nod when he came across a patient with severe injuries. Those who received heavy wounds to the abdomen, chest or head and those who were beyond medical help were moved to one side. It was China's job to make them as comfortable as possible, administering them with a high dose of morphine. The medical officer had no choice but to leave these patients to die.

Some patients' wounds were septic and were in a stinking, foul condition. One soldier presented himself with a two-day-old wound that he had bandaged up himself. He had a deep shrapnel wound in his left thigh and had been too afraid to report to a medic, fearing that he would be faced with an amputation. He had left it too late to seek medical attention. His wound was infested with maggots and he had developed a severe infection. It bothered China to know that antibiotics didn't yet exist and so many men around her were dying unnecessarily. She was the only one aware that penicillin wouldn't be discovered until the outbreak of World War II.

One teenage soldier had all the hallmarks of trench foot. China didn't need to wait for the patient to be assessed by Officer Miller as she had already come across three cases of trench foot back at the casualty clearing station. The recent heavy rains had turned conditions in the trenches into a muddy swamp, just the right circumstances for men who spent hours standing in puddles to develop the peculiar ailment. The boyish-looking private complained that his feet had been feeling numb for the past day or so, but they had eventually become hot and painful. Upon examination, China could see that his feet were severely swollen and some of his toes were beginning to turn black, indicating the onset of gangrene. The first course of action China took was to carefully and thoroughly wash the young private's feet with soap and water. She then applied an antiseptic lotion and administered the patient

with an injection of anti-tetanus serum. The next stage of treatment involved painting the patient's feet with a one-percent solution of picric acid in spirit. Normally, when feet were cold and numb, it was the practice to frequently rub them and wrap them in cotton wool, but since this patient's feet were red and hot, China thought it best to leave them exposed and elevated. When the patient was comfortable enough, as comfortable as one could be lying on a concrete floor covered by blankets, China gave the private a large dose of aspirin to relieve his pain. This soldier was lucky that his gangrene toes were dry, as it meant that there was a slight chance that they would recover and amputation could be avoided. The next casualty to arrive, however, wasn't as lucky.

Another young private, only twenty-two years of age, arrived by stretcher with a fractured and mutilated right leg, which had been shattered by a shell. There was a tourniquet round his leg, right above the knee. It was obvious from the wound that there were numerous fragments of shell buried in the tissues of his leg, but he was in no fit state to be transported to a dressing station, let alone a casualty clearing station, where he could have been X-rayed. The man was in considerable pain and had clearly lost a great deal of blood. Officer Miller called upon China and Jack for their assistance. Jack was to tie the patient down to the stretcher as best he could, while China was to administer a dose of chloroform. The patient had been screaming out for his mother since he had arrived and only stopped crying out when the chloroform began to kick in. China passed a scalpel and a bone saw to Officer Miller. Even though the patient had been tied down and wasn't fully conscious, China and Jack had been instructed to hold him down, as many patients still managed to thrash about wildly in delirium during the procedure. Officer Miller made an incision through the skin and muscle of the patient's right thigh, directly down to the bone. He carefully made incisions both above and below, to leave a flap of skin on one side. Reaching for his bone saw, the officer began to saw through the bone. He kept sawing until it had been completely severed and the limb fell to the floor.

China immediately began to feel nauseous, but didn't let it show. The next step was to tie off the blood vessels and arteries with sutures. The officer then proceeded to scrape the edges of the bone smooth, to prevent it from tearing through the skin. He then pulled the flap of skin across to sew it closed, making sure to leave a small drainage hole. It was then up to China to bandage the stump.

It had been a long and gruelling night for them all and although there was a slight lull in the amount of casualties being brought in, there was still much more work to be done.

The smell of the bunker wasn't at all pleasant. Some of the patients' wounds were in a most foul state and the men had been living for so long in the most unhygienic of conditions, which further added to the offensive stench. Worse still than the smell of death and decay in the air were the cries and moans of dying men. It was the most gut-wrenching sound that tore at one's heart. Men of all ages and from all walks of life were calling out for their mothers. One officer, who lay dying of blood poisoning, was in a state of delirium and had been calling out for his men to charge at the Germans. China couldn't bear to take a break and continued to care for the soldiers in any way that she could. When she wasn't tending to wounds, she held the hands of dying patients, reassuring them that their pain would soon ease away.

Officer Miller, whose white coat was splattered and soaked in blood, made it his business to step outside the dismal bunker to get some fresh air. He tilted his head back to look up at the cold, twinkling stars in the sky above him, before dunking his head straight down into a bucket of cool water to wash away the splatters of blood and sweat that had been trickling down his face. The German barrage had died down a little for the night, except for the odd rumble of artillery in the distance. When he arrived back to the bunker, he had commented to several of the medics and stretcher-bearers present that it was near the time when they should cross over into No Man's Land to collect more casualties and retrieve dead bodies. China and Officer Miller remained in the

bunker, carrying on their work, right into the early hours of the morning.

When he got a chance, Officer Miller informed China of the usual, late-night routines of the soldiers along the line. Whenever things seemed to quieten down and the Boche ran out of steam for the night, groups of stretcher-bearers would venture out, past the barbed wire, into No Man's Land to retrieve fallen comrades, dead or alive. Some poor unfortunate souls would have spent an entire day entangled in the barbed wire, having been wounded earlier as they were going over the top. Many soldiers were left there to die a slow, excruciating death. Sometimes, late at night, men were driven to despair, listening to the moans of those dying beyond the parapet of their trenches. Unable to rescue their comrades, the men were forced to listen to the haunting, deathly groans from No Man's Land.

Officer Miller went on to explain that the early hours of the morning were also the most suitable time for transporting casualties onwards to dressing stations and hospitals, as well as transporting equipment, food, weapons and medical supplies back to the trenches.

A steady trickle of wounded soldiers arrived at the bunker throughout the night. Corpses were piled up onto the back of wagons and were transported to a military cemetery close to the casualty clearing station in the nearest town. China was aware that this was the most graphic and haunting history lesson that she had ever experienced. Words couldn't describe the heart-rending desolation that overwhelmed her at the sight of men's bodies being carted away like worthless waste. These men had lives up until their untimely departure; they had mothers, fathers, children, wives and girlfriends; they had hobbies and personalities. All they had amounted to in the end was cannon fodder in another pointless war. China wasn't sure if she could bear to be subjected to one more night of such horror. She had to force herself to believe that the Red Cross were searching for her. They were crying out for volunteers for the war back home and would surely make the effort

to locate those volunteers who became misplaced. She would just have to bide her time until a rescue party arrived. She only wished she knew how many more days she would have to endure such a nightmare.

Up until a certain point during the night, Officer Miller had been in a most serene and calm state, despite the chaos and trauma that surrounded him. However, to China's amazement, he came across a patient who seemed to make his blood boil. A young corporal, who had presented himself with bullet wounds in each of his hands, approached the officer in an unusually composed manner. The officer took one look at the corporal's hands and shook his head. He called for one of the other army medics to tend to the man's wounds and started to curse out loud as he stormed out of the bunker in a rage. He cursed the corporal, he cursed the Germans and, most of all, he cursed the war.

It wasn't until sometime later that China had learned from one of the medics that the corporal was known to Officer Miller. He had been a professional piano player before being reluctantly drafted into the war. He was a sensitive soul, not the kind that was accustomed to being around violence and not the type of man who could mentally cope with the atrocities of war. It was obvious to Officer Miller by the nature of the wound that the young corporal had willingly held both of his hands up high above the trenches, so that he would be shot and sent back home. It was also obvious by his wounds that he would never again play the piano. Officer Miller had been cursing him for taking the easy way out. China was appalled by the effect that a war could have on the human mind and soul. She shuddered to think what effect it would have on her if she was trapped there for much longer. She knew it would take a lot more than a bullet in the hand to send her back home. It wasn't going to be so simple for her to find an easy way out.



CHAPTER 7

AS TIME GOES BY



China lay shivering in her sleep upon the hard floor of the bunker, although Jack had tucked two extra blankets about her shoulders while she was asleep. It had been almost a week since that night when they had arrived at the trenches and the circumstances of the war hadn't improved much. The notorious Battle of the Somme was in full swing and the men were being slaughtered each day in their hundreds. Fresh battalions of troops were arriving to the front daily to take the place of those who fell before them. China had been exposed to so much brutality in the last few days and Jack had commented that it could only have served to toughen her up. She was exhausted from the long hours of labour and horrified by the casualties that she came across, but she threw herself into her work, which prevented her from moping about her predicament.

As soon as she opened her eyes, she felt stiff all over from being huddled up in her sleep, to protect herself against the cold. She couldn't understand why it felt so chilly, although it was the last week in July. Temperatures had started to pick up a little and the rain had actually stopped two days ago. Jack had already left for the casualty clearing station, his ambulance full of wounded

soldiers. Officer Miller had been clearing up before China awoke. He was sitting on his hunkers, drinking tea from a tin cup and eating bread and jam from his mess tin. He got up to pour China some tea as soon as he saw her sit up. She greeted him with a 'Good morning' and wrapped the blankets around her shoulders as she ventured out the door of the bunker to look at the morning sky.

The sound of the Boche shelling them out of it throughout most of the night had ceased completely and all seemed eerily calm. As she stepped through the doorway of the bunker, the first odd thing that struck China was the bitter icy breeze that blew through her bones, making her feel damp with coldness. She continued upwards into the trench and looking down at her boots, she was baffled at the sight of thick snow on the ground. She looked up at the sky, before making a quick survey of her surroundings, taking in the bright, gleaming, white sheets of snow that had softly enveloped everything in their path. It made absolutely no sense in China's mind at all that it could have snowed so heavily out of the blue like that. She turned and almost tripped herself up, running back down the steps into the bunker.

"Do you realise that it's been snowing outside?" China questioned Officer Miller in an excited tone, watching her breath rise before her in the frosty air.

Officer Miller's tone was less excited as he made his reply.

"Yes, I discovered that earlier and you will be happy to know that I made it my business to hunt down an overcoat for you, as you never brought your own when you arrived."

He smiled at her as he got up and passed the overcoat to her, throwing it over her shoulders. It was a long, woollen, British Army trench coat, khaki-green in colour. It had been issued to another officer who unfortunately had been killed and had no more use for it. Although it didn't match her own uniform, she was glad of its warmth and pulled her arms through the sleeves before buttoning it right up to her neck. The hem of her long skirt and apron were trailing about three inches from the bottom of the

coat, just covering the tops of her boots. Officer Miller had fetched a long, kaki-green scarf from the bench at the back of the room and draped it around her neck. It was large enough to hang over her head, protecting her ears from the sharp wind when she had to go outside.

"Don't you think it's highly unusual to have such a heavy snow-fall at this time of year?" quizzed China.

"It's not that unusual for the month of December you know," Officer Miller replied. "One of the NCOs read out a telegram that he had received early this morning, dated December tenth, nineteen seventeen, which pretty much accounts for the snow, I guess."

China couldn't bring herself to speak, but just kept on glaring at Officer Miller, as if he were a mad man. It didn't take him long to twig her bewildered look and he asked her if she was feeling alright. She continued to stare wide-eyed at him for a few moments longer, before she found the right words.

"Have you lost the plot altogether, Officer?" she asked, half-laughing. "It was July nineteen sixteen when I fell asleep last night. Now you're telling me it's December nineteen seventeen and you're asking me if I'm alright!" China had a most puzzled expression on her face and hung on with anticipation to hear Officer Miller's explanation, but he couldn't offer her one.

"That's the nature of this war, Miss Winter; you can fall asleep in nineteen sixteen and wake up the next morning in nineteen seventeen. That's the way it has been for as long as I can remember. Another thing you may not yet have discovered: you may end up in a completely different location at any given time. We could be on the frontline in Belgium tomorrow morning for all we know."

"But how-?" China didn't get to finish her question before Officer Miller interrupted her.

"Don't ask me how or why; those are questions I have been asking myself for years. All I can tell you is that we have no choice but to accept our circumstances and fight on. There is no way out of this godforsaken war."

Officer Miller ended the conversation at that point and made his way over to a patient who had just woken up groaning with pain.

The freezing temperatures during the night meant that all the bottled medication had frozen over and needed to be thawed out. China was instructed to boil some water at the campfire, which had been lit outside in the trench. She did as she was ordered and carried out a large pot of water to place on the campfire. The powdery snow crunched under her boots as she made her way awkwardly along the trench, in the direction of the rising black smoke. A tall, stocky-looking soldier had seen her struggling to carry the pot of water and took it out of her arms without even asking if she needed help. He allowed her to lead the way and followed close behind her. There were four other soldiers crouched around the fire, chewing on their miserable rations and chatting pleasantly. Directly above the flames of the fire, there was a metal crane in the shape of a tripod with a hook hanging down from the centre, which could be used to boil water or cook food. The soldier who had carried the water didn't need any instruction from China and took it upon himself to hang the pot by its handle onto the hook at the end of the crane. China was very grateful to the stocky-looking soldier and smiled warmly at him as she thanked him. He didn't break his silence and instead gave her a friendly smile and a nod in return, tipping the edge of his army cap in a respectful manner before walking back to where she had first encountered him.

The rest of the soldiers stood back from the fire to make way for China. They each nodded at her in a friendly manner and carried on with their conversations. They were in jolly form and were laughing about one of the other privates down the line, who had been complaining of a horrid toothache for well over a week. He was too afraid of the army medics to have them look at it and referred to them as butchers. He had planned to take out his own tooth with a set of pliers and had asked some of his pals to save up their rum rations so he could get himself in the mood for the job.

After downing a half a litre of rum, he managed to get himself intoxicated and ended up pulling out the wrong tooth. When he realised that it was the wrong tooth, he pulled another one, which, low and behold, was also the wrong tooth. By the end of the ordeal, he had lost three teeth in one go and not only woke up with a sore mouth, but a cracking hangover as well! He became a legend up and down the line overnight and earned himself a new nickname: Tooth Fairy!

It had started to snow again and the flakes sifted down ever so gently, covering the soldiers' long trench coats in dots of white. As China pulled her scarf up over the crown of her head, a few wisps of curls fell about her face. From behind, anyone would have mistaken her for one of the soldiers.

The tallest of the men leaned forward to offer China a piece of dried-up egg-biscuit from his mess tin and although she was hungry, she politely declined. These men had little enough to eat without sharing their rations with her. Besides, she had her own rations set aside.

The smell of smoke from the campfire was strong and woody. It was a comforting scent to China; it reminded her of the times that she had camped out for fun with her friends as a child.

"Oh yeah," declared the stoutest of the soldiers, "I meant to show you this last night, lads." And, with that, he began to root deep down into one of the pockets of his coat. The other soldiers were silent as they watched him produce a small, peculiar-looking item, about the size of his hand. It was a slim, flat, rectangular item with a shiny glass surface on one side. It was black in colour, except for the word 'Nokia' in small, white print at the bottom of the glass surface. The soldiers were utterly dumbfounded.

"I found it about a mile down the trench yesterday when I'd been digging. I cleaned it up a bit, but I'm damned if I know what the hell it is," the stout soldier informed them.

"You mad bastard, Billy! It's probably a new type of German bomb and you go and put it in your pocket!" The skinniest of the

soldiers immediately blushed after he cursed, remembering China's presence.

"Yeah, Billy. The German word at the bottom of it should have been a dead giveaway. It's a Nokia Bomb!" the tall soldier sniggered and all the others, including Billy and China, began to laugh. China had a good reason to laugh; she recognised the item as an antique, touch screen smart phone, which probably dated back to 2016. She would love to have told the men exactly what the object was, but it would have opened a whole can of worms for her. The first thought that struck her mind was that the phone belonged to another time and place. It would only have existed about one hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War. Just how it had ended up buried in the middle of the trenches was a total mystery to her.

"Well, it's one hell of a suspicious-looking device; I certainly wouldn't be carrying that thing around in my pocket, Billy," the skinny soldier warned. "You wouldn't know, but there could be a timer of some sort attached to it and you could end up suddenly exploding into pieces, with bits of you flying across No Man's Land."

The quietest of the four soldiers took hold of the device in his hand and carefully examined it before giving his expert opinion.

"Tell you what, Billy ... you should listen to John; he's right. I've seen one of these things before and I can tell you exactly what it is. It's a modern version of the German hand grenade. Tell you what I'll do, Billy, I'll take it off your hands and I'll take it with me when I'm on duty in the listening post tonight. I'll fire the damn thing right back over the barbed wire on their side and we'll blow a few of the fuckers up into the heavens!"

The expert shoved the Nokia Bomb into one of his own pockets and the rest of the soldiers cheered with great encouragement.

Billy was roaring with enthusiasm; "Go on, Mad Mick, you'll have the Boche shaking in their boots! You'll show them who's boss!"

China had turned her back on the party of soldiers and was bent over, trying her best to hold in her laughter at the thought of Mad Mick blasting the Germans out of it by flinging an antique phone over their trench.

When the water in the pot had come to the boil, Billy, the stout soldier, carefully lifted it from the hook and carried it back to the bunker with China in tow. Having witnessed the brief comedy act, she thanked him, half-giggling in his face.

It was as cold inside the bunker as it was outside. China set to work immediately, thawing out all the frozen bottles of medicine by placing them into the pot of boiling water. When she had finished that task, she used the water to wash the blood-stained surgical tools and equipment that had been used for amputations during the night. As the water turned red, China's thoughts turned to her brother, Maddox. There was nothing she wanted more in the world than to know that he was safe. It troubled her to think that they were separated in time, trapped in two completely different wars. She was beginning to accept the fact that they were literally worlds apart from each other.

As she watched Officer Miller tending to the casualties, she imagined that Jodie would have been doing exactly the same thing at that moment in time. She longed to have someone she could talk to and held onto the hope that she would eventually come across one of the other volunteers who had been in the same telepod as her. Perhaps one of the other volunteers had some idea about what went wrong or how they could return to their own time.



WEEKS WENT by in the trenches before China encountered more Red Cross volunteers from her own time. The long, harsh winter had mellowed out into days drenched with sun showers and sharp winds. Conditions were muddy and sloppy in the trenches, but the men were thankful that the bitter, cold nights were behind them

once more. Christmas had come and gone, as did New Year's Eve, which the soldiers on either side of the war did their best to celebrate. There had been an unofficial, temporary ceasefire for several hours that night as soldiers up and down the lines congregated in groups, huddled around campfires, having sing-songs and drinking their rum rations, which they had saved for the occasion. Spring was in the air and despite the rain of bombs tearing up the earth around her, China tried to remain optimistic. It was 1918, the year that the Great War would come to an end. All she needed to do was to brace herself and hang in there until the end.

January had rolled by in a haze of earth-shattering explosions, coupled with deadly poisonous gas attacks. February was much the same. China had experienced so much suffering and misery endured by the soldiers in such a short period of time. She had gained a lifetime of medical knowledge through hands-on experience. She was certain that she had come across every potential horror a war could possibly inflict on a human soul, until the early hours of a damp, foggy, February morning.

China instantly recognised a chubby-looking soldier who lay on the wet ground of the trench, curled up in a ball in a mucky puddle. He was hugging his knees while rocking back and forth, jittering and jerking violently, his eyes bulging out from their sockets. It was Billy, the courteous young soldier who had carried the large pot of water for her on the first day she met him. He had come to her aid on a number of occasions since then. He was a jolly sort of chap and not the type one would think would succumb to shock. But this was a severe case of shellshock; China had seen it several times before. There really wasn't a lot that could be done for the man, except to discharge him and send him back home to his family. What struck China as odd was the fact that the four stretcher-bearers that had carried Billy back from the lookout post only moments before also seemed to be suffering from shock. The soldier who was the least affected was trembling as he pointed towards No Man's Land. Even his voice was shaky as he mumbled random words, which were just barely audible to China.

The soldier grabbed Officer Miller roughly by the collar as he whispered the words, "Unnatural ... Impossible ... Help them."

Officer Miller grabbed hold of the stretcher lying in the mud as he called out to Jack and two middle-aged privates who were squatting close by, sharing a cigarette.

"We're going over the top," he announced in an authoritative tone.

The two privates each took a final drag of the half-smoked cigarette, before one of them stubbed it out on his boot, placing it in the top pocket of his tunic to save it for later. China couldn't help but wonder if the private would survive the venture out into No Man's Land and return to the trench in one piece to enjoy the rest of his cigarette.

China seized a medical kit from one of the other stretcher-bearers, who was sitting in the dirt, holding his head in his hands. She slung the strap of the bag over her shoulders, while making for the wooden steps leading up onto the parapet of the trench.

"Where do you think you're going?" questioned Jack in a concerned manner, clutching China by the arm as if she were a small child.

"I'm going out there, Jack," responded China, sharply. "Look at the state those men are in. You're going to need all the help you can get by the looks of things."

Jack could see the glint of headstrong determination in China's eyes and promptly let go of her arm.

"Well, you better keep your pretty little head down and stay right behind me at all times," he warned her, as a father might caution his daughter.

There was a lull in firing on both sides, which would have been peaceful except for the unearthly moans of those who lay dying among the rot and decay of corpses. Rats eked out their miserable existence, feeding from the dead and scurried about brazenly, unperturbed by the chaos that surrounded them. The name, No Man's Land, said it all; the land didn't belong to any man, but had become a territory ruled by rats.

It was still dark, but was gradually beginning to grow brighter with the onset of a dewy dawn breaking its way into the heavens. The sun stretched out across the land as if it were yawning after a long night's slumber. The silhouette of the four men bearing a stretcher and China trailing along behind them in the distance was barely visible from the trenches. As they ventured further out into the misty haze, the thick fog gave the impression that it was rising from the soggy, potholed muck beneath their feet. They had wormed their way through a gap in the barbed wire, slithering on their bellies like snakes and crawling over bloodied bits of bodies in their path. The smell of decay hung in the air like a threat. The groans of the undead grew even more harrowing, gripping at their souls like sharp hooks and tearing at their emotions as they tried to locate the cries of those who screamed the loudest. They were coming dangerously close to the German frontline when the fog began to disperse ever so slightly ahead of them, showing the outline of a soldier kicking and frolicking about on the ground, screaming as loudly as his lungs would allow him. As the party got closer to the screaming soldier, it was possible for Officer Miller and Jack, at the head of the stretcher, to make out the shape of another body thrashing about on top of the first one. The second casualty was moaning like an animal in deep pain. Drawing closer to the two bodies, Officer Miller was the first to realise that something was very wrong with the scene before them. He stood motionless with his mouth hanging open, as he looked on in disbelief. Jack let go of the stretcher and made a dash towards the two men, falling to his knees.

"It's just not possible," muttered Officer Miller, shaking his head, refusing to accept what he was seeing.

China ran to Jack's side, dropping the medical kit as she came to a sudden halt. She gasped out loud while trying her best to fight back tears. The two privates had dropped the stretcher on the ground and stood still, staring madly at the spectacle ahead of them, as if they had both been whacked across the head with a large frying pan. Neither Jack nor Officer Miller dared to touch

either of the soldiers who lay squirming in agony on the ground. On closer inspection, China realised that only one of the soldiers was German while the other one was a British Red Cross Volunteer from China's time. It was horrific enough to watch a person die, but to watch two people die in such a bizarre and sinister manner was utterly gruesome. The two men had somehow become fused together, their bodies twisted and contorted. They had somehow merged into each other through their abdomens, as if one of them had walked through the other and managed to become bonded to him. The blood that trickled from their joined torsos was a deep burgundy colour. The expressions of pain on their faces were difficult to look at. They screamed and moaned as they tried in vain to wriggle themselves free from one another, all the while kicking and thrashing about on the ground.

"It's ... it's just not humanly possible," Officer Miller mumbled under his breath, not taking his gaze away from the sickening sight.

Jack gave China a knowing look, but remained silent. He didn't dare mention the similar scene that he and China had stumbled upon the first night he had met her. It was too awful for Jack to remember, that he was obliged to put a man out of his misery.

Upon closer inspection, China recognised one of the men as the young doctor who had queued in front of her with his brother, volunteering for the Red Cross. This man hadn't travelled in the same telepod as her, which meant that there were even more accidental time travellers wandering about than she had accounted for and she began to wonder if Jodie might also have accidentally slipped back in time. Having witnessed the carnage of another time travel disaster, China began to count herself lucky to have survived the ordeal.

Jack knew what he had to do and swallowed hard as he reached for his pistol. Before he even got the chance to draw his weapon, he was suddenly startled by the ear-splitting sound of two gunshots, which came out of nowhere. Officer Miller had beat him to it and shot each of the conjoined men in the head. A tirade of

bullets unexpectedly began to hail down upon them from the German trenches, forcing them to abandon their position and make a run back to their own side, thankful for the thick fog, which kept them hidden from the enemy.

Once they had all made it back to the safe cocoon of the filthy, wet, rat-infested trenches, Officer Miller was the first to notice a change in one of the privates who had helped carry the stretcher. The private's eyes resembled two large table-tennis balls, bulging out of his sockets. His face grew deathly pale as he hunched forward and began to vomit with the shock of what he had witnessed. He narrowly missed Officer Miller's boots as he leaned in closer to examine him. This was followed by piercing screams and uncontrollable shaking. It was heart-breaking to watch a soldier mentally deteriorate in such a manner and China had to walk away from the scene.

She kept herself busy for the day, tending to other patients. Although she had a strong stomach when exposed to blood, she found it rather difficult to watch a strong man cut down in his prime from shellshock. It was especially hard to deal with the helpless feeling in her gut, that there was nothing she could possibly do to ease his suffering.

Jack had spent most of the day making trips back and forth from the trenches to the local field hospital, transporting patients and delivering medical supplies.

It was late in the evening by the time China managed to sit and rest herself on an empty ammunition box. There was a lull in the shelling, except for the occasional explosion that could be heard in the distance. China sipped her black tea as she played a game of cards with two older men: a corporal and a sergeant. It was twilight and the only source of light they had was coming from a candle in a battered-looking, tin mug. They were playing poker, a game that China was skilled at. Her grandfather had taught her how to play as a young girl and she had beaten him at every game since. After three wins, she decided to let the sergeant beat her, just to boost his morale.

"That's the prettiest damn poker-face I've ever seen!" came a thick Liverpool accent, which sounded familiar to China. She looked up immediately from her hand of cards and was astonished to see the handsome lieutenant that she had met in the tavern the night she arrived in France.

"Lieutenant Applebee! What are you doing here?" gasped China, forgetting entirely about the game and dropping her hand face-up for all to see on the crate they had been using as a makeshift table.

"I could ask you the same question, Miss Winter!" came the reply. "And, please, call me Eric," he added.

Much to the disappointment of the sergeant who was close to winning, China sprang to her feet and abandoned the game. It was just the tonic she needed to spend the rest of the night chatting to Eric, having the opportunity to gaze into his piercing, grey eyes.

It was impossible for China to explain to Eric the reason why she had run out on him the night they had first met. It was the first question Eric asked her, but she found that she couldn't give him a straight answer. She dared not tell him about the war between the International Armed Forces and the United Citizen's Army. If she mentioned the fact that she was a Red Cross volunteer from the future, who had accidentally travelled back in time, the microchip imbedded in her wrist would burn and throb through her veins. She wanted so much to be honest with Eric, but she was forced to remain reticent.

Eric guessed that she was somewhat troubled and out of respect, he didn't wish to pry. China was growing increasingly frustrated, having had to abandon her conversations in mid-sentence at times for fear of saying anything that was forbidden.

"There is so much that I want to tell you, Eric, but circumstances will not allow me to. I really hope you can understand," China said softly as she stared hard at the top button of Eric's tunic.

Eric placed his hand under China's chin and gently lifted her head so that he could look into her eyes as he spoke.

"It's alright, China, you don't have to explain yourself to me, but if you're in trouble I'd like to think that I could help you."

China smiled shyly and looked away before returning her gaze to his eyes. All that she could hint at was that she got caught up in the war and seemed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. She told Eric about her family back home, that her parents were dead and that her brother had disappeared. She mentioned her grandfather, but failed to include the fact that she lived in an airborne steamship, far in the future. Some things, she decided, were best left unsaid.

Eric also spoke about his life back home and revealed the fact that he had a fiancée called Maureen, an Irish girl whom he had met while training in Athlone, Ireland. China's heart sank a little when he took out a black and white photo of Maureen from an inside pocket in his tunic to show to her. He paused for a moment, smiling proudly at the photo, before putting it back into his pocket. China asked Eric if he was intending to get married as soon as his next leave came up or if he planned to wait until the end of the war.

As soon as she had asked the question, Eric's expression changed. He became melancholy and stared into space as he coldly replied, "There won't be any wedding, I'm afraid. It's quite impossible now, you see."

China was puzzled by his reply.

"It was simply never meant to be," he added. His sudden change in demeanour didn't make sense to China and yet, curious as she was about the matter, she felt that it wasn't her place to question him about it.

They had both become distracted by the over-excited chatter of a small group of men close by who seemed to be huddled around a device, which they were having great difficulty operating. Getting closer to the action, China began to laugh hysterically as she watched four soldiers attempting to play a record by placing it on the circular dish inside an antique microwave, which they had stumbled across while digging a trench. They were trying their

best to find a way of winding up the microwave so the record would start to play and were at a complete loss as to why the modern-looking 'gramophone' wouldn't work. They proceeded to open and close the door of the microwave several times, cursing and pleading with it to play some music. Needless to say, their attempts were unsuccessful.



WEEKS PASSED by and China became immersed in her work. She was beginning to feel comfortable in Eric's company. He was a gentleman, just like Jack. China hadn't given up hope of locating Jodie and had arranged a lift back to the casualty clearing station with the next convoy of casualties leaving the front. She figured that it made sense to check with the matron and the rest of the staff to see if Jodie had made an appearance there. Failing that, she intended to make enquires at several field hospitals along the front.

Jack was unable to give China a lift that morning, as he was detained further along the front, transporting patients to a hospital barge. The patients were to be shipped back home, should they be lucky enough to survive their injuries. Jack had always maintained that the trenches were no place for a woman and had vowed to have China removed from immediate danger as soon as a medic had been deployed to take her place.

The morning that she was leaving the trenches was the same morning that Eric was given leave and so he agreed to escort China directly to the casualty clearing station, to ensure that she got there safely. Eric had discussed the matter with Jack the previous night.

Just as Eric had finished packing all his worldly possessions into a duffle bag, German prisoners of war were marched along the trenches, with their hands tied behind their backs. There were five in total being led to the section of the trench where the medics could see to them, before they were moved onto a prisoner of war

camp. China watched as she stood waiting for Eric. She recognised the British soldier who was shouting obscenities and pointing a gun into a German prisoner's face; it was Mad Mick, the Nokia Bomb expert. This time he meant business as he waved a gun about, threatening to blow the head off the German prisoner if he opened his mouth. On closer inspection, China realised that the unusual-looking gun that Mad Mick was aiming at the German's face was in fact an antique hairdryer dating back to the 1990s! She imagined that if the hairdryer had been plugged in, he really could have blown the prisoner's head off! An even stranger sight still was the fear in the prisoner's eyes as he stared down the barrel of the weird-looking weapon.



AFTER SPENDING such a long time living in squalid conditions, it felt liberating to finally get out of the trenches. The air was fresh and crisp, giving China a heightened sense of freedom, although she was trapped in time.

As the pair made their way towards a motor ambulance parked in the distance, the bright morning sky began to crackle with the rip-roar of artillery and shell blasts, which shook the earth, gorging apocalyptic craters throughout the land. Eric was so busy relaying a funny story to China as they walked along the torn-up landscape that he didn't notice the blood trickling from his shoulder blade, down the sleeve of his shirt. He wasn't even aware that the blade of a sword, which had been thrust into his shoulder from behind, had pierced right through him. It was China who had screamed and drawn his attention to it.

At first it wasn't apparent where exactly the sword had come from. All that was visible was the sword itself and the hand that held it. Moments later, the blade was swiftly withdrawn. The perpetrator was nowhere to be seen except for two consecutive lightning-quick flashes of light, which seemed to reveal the radiant outline of a man on horseback, wielding a sword. The apparition

was so rapid and brief that they barely had a chance to make sense of it, although they both managed to make out a dated military uniform, which China guessed to have belonged to the American Civil War. Although they could no longer see the apparition of the soldier, they could hear his horse neighing and breaking into a gallop, which seemed to be moving away from them. The phantom noise abruptly stopped as the pair made a dash for the ambulance up ahead of them, Eric holding a hand over his wound as he ran. Just as they reached the back of the ambulance, the oddest thing occurred: the ambulance began to flicker in and out of existence right before their eyes. It flickered continuously for at least thirty seconds before it completely disappeared altogether. The sky grew darker, the temperature dropped dramatically and the atmosphere began to sizzle with electricity. What followed were the distinct sounds of a completely different type of warfare – the sounds of shotguns and cannon blasts. The shrill pitch of a lone whistle accompanied by the roll of drums and footsteps marching along to the beat could be heard drawing closer. With each second that passed, the sounds came closer still, until a procession of marching soldiers with a marching band in tow suddenly materialised into existence. The entire landscape had transformed from muddy potholes to a lush, green meadow filled with thick bushes and blossoming trees. Both China and Eric were completely mesmerised by the sights unravelling before them. Neither of them spoke a word as they watched the historic scene unveil itself before their eyes. They looked on, open mouthed, as a platoon of soldiers dressed from head to toe in dark navy uniforms marched towards the distant hills, closely followed by at least one hundred more soldiers on horseback, wielding long swords buckled on their left hips.

As China turned around, she saw the military tents pitched behind them. A large, American-style plantation house loomed in the background beyond the tents. There were crates of what China presumed to be medical supplies stacked up against the sides of each tent. It was obvious from the view of the soldiers laid out on stretchers and makeshift beds on the ground that it was

some form of a field hospital. Women in long, old-fashioned dresses with extremely wide skirts trailing along the ground hurried about frantically, tending to the wounded men. The women wore aprons over their dresses, which were presumably once white in colour, but with time had become muddy and splattered in blood.

"What just happened?" gasped China as she searched Eric's face for an answer. "Have we ... have we somehow gone back in time?"

It took Eric a moment before his reply. "I have absolutely no idea, China." He almost began to whisper as he looked all about him in a dubious manner. "All I can tell you is that it's not the first time something like this has happened to me."

Eric's shoulder was still bleeding as he continued to put pressure on the wound with his bare hand. China ushered him towards the nearest tent so that they could get the wound cleaned up and dressed. The closer they got to the tent, the more pungent the stench of death and decay became. As they stood near the entrance of the tent, a large pile of waste became visible off to the side. On closer inspection, China could see that the large heap was in fact a pile of amputated limbs – arms and legs, but mostly legs – which had been covered by layers of sawdust. China held a hand up to her mouth as she drew closer to the entrance of the tent. Soldiers of all ages lay scattered about the ground outside the tents, groaning with agony. Some called out to their loved ones, while others expelled all their energy through blood curdling screams. One man, who lay closest to the entrance of the tent, reached out a hand and grabbed at China's skirts.

"Please ... help me," he muttered before losing his grip on her clothing as she gently tugged at her skirts and continued towards the tent.

Inside the tent was something of a horror scene. Eric, in all his years of military experience, was just as aghast as China. The sickening cries of grown men in pain and the foul stench of festering wounds, mixed with the distinct aroma of chloroform, began to

make Eric feel a little queasy. The sound of a doctor in the dimly lit corner of the tent, frantically sawing away at a soldier's leg like a mad man, was almost too much for China to take in. Two women dressed in tight-fitted bodices and long-hooped, crinoline skirts were scurrying from patient to patient to pacify those who cried out the loudest. Their wide skirts rustled as their hemlines brushed against the ground, sweeping along the mud and dirt. The youngest woman, dressed in deep burgundy attire, had her dark hair caught up in a high bun with long wisps of ringlets hanging down at the back and sides. Her hair had clearly been set a day or two ago as the ringlets were almost limp and not as tight as they ought to have been. The older woman wore a forest-green bodice and skirt with cream, lace trimming about the collar and sleeves. Her hair hung neatly across the back of her shoulders in a snood. The women's hands, faces and aprons were smeared with grime and blood. It was the younger woman who first took notice of the odd pair as they stood staring at the scene unfolding within the tent. She was dashing towards a patient, who lay stretched out on the ground directly behind Eric, when she came to an abrupt stop. Her eyes quickly flitted back and forth from China to Eric as she tried to understand why these two strangers were dressed so outlandishly. She remained silent as she continued to stare at the bizarre couple. It was China who broke the silence when she asked the woman for some clean linen and bandages. The woman made no reply, but remained fixed to the spot in a daze, with a puzzled expression.

"We could really do with your help, miss," Eric added and with that, the young woman stretched out her arms towards China, presenting her with clean linen and bandages. China graciously took what she needed and asked the woman for something she could use to clean Eric's wound. Again, the woman made no reply, but gestured towards the corner of the tent in the direction of the doctor, where a couple of large crates stood alongside a wooden bench. A number of medicinal bottles stood on the bench: carbolic acid, bromine and liquid iodine. Some bottles were corked, while

others were uncorked. Both China and Eric made their way towards the corner of the tent, stepping across bodies along the way.

The young woman finally broke her silence with an American accent, as she stood watching China and Eric rooting through the bottles on the bench.

"You sure sound very strange."

Eric sat up on the bench and removed his tunic and shirt. He held his arm outstretched so that China could get better access to his wound. China soaked a strip of linen cloth in carbolic acid, before moving closer to Eric, glancing into his piercing eyes and pausing to look at his lips as he smiled warmly at her. She couldn't help but glance at his muscular bulk of a chest as she gripped his shoulder for support. Her heart began to beat a little faster as she leaned in even closer to him, so she could dab at his wound. She was aware that the wound was beginning to sting as she cleaned it. Her heart skipped a beat as Eric sighed out loud, grabbing hold of her arm with his free hand.

"Gently does it, China," Eric pleaded as his eyes bore into hers, causing her to blush a little. Then the butterflies began to dance around inside her. She was certain that Eric realised that she had developed a crush on him.

After she had finished applying the dressing, she took the liberty of glimpsing down at his torso once more, before he began to put his shirt back on. Her lustful thoughts were interrupted by the sound of two grubby-looking soldiers who had just entered the tent, bearing a stretcher. It was their job to collect the dead, making way for new casualties. Their trip wasn't wasted as they had plenty of corpses to choose from. There were men and boys of all ages lying motionless, already on their way to meet their maker. China turned to watch the men choose a body to lay out on the stretcher, when she suddenly felt a presence invading her space from behind. It wasn't Eric who stood so close behind her, but the doctor who, prior to that moment, had been in the throes of hacking off limbs. The doctor was relatively good looking for a

man in his sixties. He had a full head of grey hair, which was parted to one side in the form of a quiff hanging over one eye. He was clean shaven, except for a hint of grey stubble, and wore glasses, which sat on the middle of his nose, allowing his attractive, brownish-green eyes to peer out over the frames at China's startled face. The sleeves of his white, blood-stained shirt were rolled up and the top buttons undone. He was standing so close to China that she could see the trickle of sweat beads forming on his brow. He squinted ever so slightly as he gazed intensely into her eyes, giving her a half-smile before taking her all in from head to toe. She waited for him to speak first. His lips parted, but he hesitated to speak for a moment, taking the time to study her face before sighing. His eyes seemed to smile wisely at her as he spoke.

"You obviously have some degree of medical training."

The doctor spoke with an upper-class, English accent, making more of a statement rather than asking a question.

"Dr Walker has gone to run some errands, so I will be requiring an assistant surgeon. You will do just nicely!" he informed China, grinning at her and searching her eyes for a response.

China's mouth opened slightly to make a reply, but she couldn't find the words.

The doctor's attention turned towards Eric, as he quickly sized him up with his wise eyes.

"As for you, young man ..." His eyes narrowing as he met Eric's gaze. "You can put your good arm to use by helping lay some of our men to rest." And, with that, the doctor produced a shovel, thrusting it into Eric's arms, much to his surprise.

"Would you be so kind as to tell us where we are, Doctor?" inquired Eric, taking a firm grip of the shovel with his good arm.

The doctor smiled and replied, "Ah, a fellow Englishman. Is that a Liverpool accent?" The doctor didn't wait for Eric to confirm, but instead went onto answer Eric's question. "Crawfish Spring, Chickamauga. Georgia, to be more exact."

The doctor's gaze returned to China, prompting her to speak to him for the first time. "Can you ... can you tell us what year it is,

Doctor?" She bit her lip nervously as she almost expected the doctor to laugh out loud at the madness of the question.

He didn't laugh, but instead answered her without passing any regard to the absurdity of the question.

"Eighteen sixty-three, my dear. September nineteenth, if you're wondering."

Eric's startled gasp led the doctor to laugh wryly as he patted him gently on the good shoulder and added, "Oh come now, it's not as bad as all that. This is obviously your first time round. Think of how it is for me. I've been trapped in this war for over twenty years now."

"Twenty years?" reiterated Eric with a most baffled look spread across his face. "But how could you be here twenty years? The American Civil War never lasted that long. It started in eighteen sixty-one and ends in—"

"Ends in eighteen sixty-five, I know. I was there. On a few occasions," the doctor interrupted and turned his attention to a passing nurse, requesting more clean linen and bandages in a rather curt manner. Before China or Eric could quiz him any further, the doctor quickly turned on his heels, making his way back to the grim corner of the tent to set up his makeshift theatre for further surgery.

Eric's mouth was already hanging open before he spoke to China.

"We've somehow slipped back to eighteen sixty-three ... We're in the middle of one of the bloodiest battles in American history ... and I have to help dispose of the ..." Eric found it difficult to finish his sentence.

"I know," China tried to reassure him. "I know, it's messed up."

Eric didn't have long to wonder about their predicament before the stretcher-bearers returned to clear more bodies. Eric followed them out of the tent with his shovel as if it were the most natural thing to do. China took a good look around the chaos that surrounded her and decided to put her recent medical training to good use. Although China's mind was burning with questions for

the doctor, she had no choice but to focus on the task at hand: removing bullets and bits of clothing from wounds and preparing limbs for amputation. The doctor worked tirelessly throughout the night, stopping only for the occasional mouthful of water to quench his thirst. China found that she had grown accustomed to the sight of blood and never once flinched when faced with jagged bones jutting out from gaping wounds.

It was a challenge for China to work with such primitive medical knowledge and the limited medical supplies of former times. Peering into the doctor's medical bag, China could see a plethora of obsolete medical provisions. Apart from a thermometer, forceps, tweezers, probes, syringes, needles, a sewing kit and scissors, she found an ear trumpet, cupping devices, catgut sutures, a magnifying glass, lancets, knives, saws and leather straps to use as restraints or tourniquets. There were vials containing tinctures and powdered medicines. Dr Rickman carried laudanum, medicinal brandy and opium for pain relief. There were no antiseptics or antibiotics to be found, as they hadn't yet been discovered.

Although it was surprising to see very few bandages in his bag, it was common practice for most Victorian doctors not to carry them at all, as they were too bulky. Doctors often relied on a patient's family to provide them instead. Victorian doctors wouldn't generally have much regard for sterilisation or hygiene standards and so it was also common practice not to wash hands between patients, which meant that infections were rife. Although cleanliness was more of an option than a requirement in those times, China was relieved to find that Dr Rickman was hygienic in all aspects of his work.



ERIC HAD BEEN OCCUPIED for much of the night with the gruesome duty of burying the dead. There were a number of poor souls who were burdened with this task, including fellow soldiers and civilians, some of which were of African American descent,

fighting for their freedom. Later in the evening, when darkness had fallen, Eric and a few other men volunteered to go out seeking more casualties and fatalities from the battlefield.

With a welcome lull in surgery, the doctor had suggested that China step outside the tent with him to get some air. It was the first time that she had taken a moment to herself since she had arrived and the crisp night air blowing softly against her cheeks felt refreshing. The dazzling display of a sea of flickering stars above her head brought the reality of the situation back to her; it wasn't some terrible dream that she was caught in, but an entirely surreal existence. The doctor's soothing voice broke through China's thoughts, as he took the opportunity to finally introduce himself. China couldn't hold back much longer, before a tirade of questions poured from her mouth.

"Dr Rickman, you mentioned earlier that you've been trapped here for over twenty years; how did it happen? Why can't you leave? How could the war have lasted twenty years?" China was about to add another question, when she paused to draw her breath. Dr Rickman gently placed his hands upon her shoulders to calm her down and stop the questions. He stared into space with a sudden melancholy look as he attempted to quell her thirst for answers.

"I can't tell you how, China, because I don't quite understand it myself." Dr Rickman sighed heavily, still staring into nothingness before he continued. "All I can remember of my former life is walking the short distance from my surgery practice to my home in London's West End, when I began to feel somewhat light-headed. It was a warm summer's evening in eighteen eighty-five and yet a thick fog seemed to come out of nowhere and began to surround me. That's when I first saw them." Dr Rickman paused and looked to the heavens, struggling to make sense of his dark memories.

"When you first saw who, Dr Rickman?" China blurted her question out, visibly frustrated at the lack of detail.

Dr Rickman tore his gaze from the heavens and looked deeply into China's inquisitive eyes as he continued.

"The white soldiers, the men who abducted me and somehow transported me to another time and place. There were four of them, all dressed in the most bizarre fashion; they were decked from head to toe in white military uniforms with weapons I hadn't seen before or since. The soldiers had clearly come from the future and had taken me to a country I was unfamiliar with, leaving me stranded in some class of futuristic conflict. There were weapons and types of machinery about me that I cannot describe. I was handed a most peculiar-looking piece of equipment and informed that it was my duty to fight. Fight whom and what, I didn't know. The next thing I remember is being flung up into the air from the forceful blast of cannon fire. I suddenly came round to find myself transported back in time to eighteen sixty-one, in the middle of a battlefield during the start of the American Civil War."

China was fascinated by the doctor's incredible account and listened with interest as he continued to speak.

"I have been trapped in this conflict for the past twenty years. Time simply doesn't move on from the end of this war. Life seems to continuously flip from eighteen sixty-five back to the start of the war, as if history is repeating itself over and over again."

China couldn't hold her astonishment and shrieked loudly at the mention of history repeating itself.

"Of course, the majority of souls around us have absolutely no idea that the war is repeating itself over and over again. As for fellow time travellers, I have met a modest amount of them passing through over the years. Some came from the past, which was evident in their manner of dress, while others came from the future. Not all time travellers that I have encountered came of their own freewill; some, like myself, have been abducted."

China was overwhelmed by Dr Rickman's words and remained silent for a few moments, pondering more questions in her mind. She finally began to realise that her slip back in time may not have been accidental after all. There were so many more questions

tearing away at her mind and so much that she wanted to tell Dr Rickman. Her mind flooded over as words began to spill from her mouth about her life in the future and her war service with the Red Cross. But the very mention of the International Armed Forces instantly had China writhing on the ground in great pain, holding onto her wrist. Dr Rickman quickly came to her aid, holding her in his arms as she struggled to cope with the pain.

"I've seen this before. You really have to be more careful what you talk about, my dear," Dr Rickman warned. "I could of course not only relieve your pain, but prevent it from recurring again, if ... if you could trust me."

China didn't have to be asked twice.

"I trust you, Doctor," she whispered through clenched teeth and with that, Dr Rickman helped her up onto her feet and led her by the arm back into the tent, through a sea of blue and navy uniforms sprawled out on the ground. He sat her down on the bench in the gloomy corner, where they had both spent hours tending to the grimmest of men's wounds. The tent was lit by oil lamps, which caused great wafts of petrol to linger in the night air. A number of men, who were out searching for more bodies, held lit tapers in their hands to light up their path. The flames could be seen dotted along the distant darkness, beyond the opening to the tent.

Upon his return to the tent, Eric was startled by the sight of Dr Rickman operating on China's wrist. His concern was quite dramatic, as he very nearly fell across the bodies of recovering soldiers as he rushed to be at China's side. His worried expression prompted China to put him at ease.

"I'm alright, Eric. The doctor's just removing a microchip from my wrist."

This wasn't a sufficient explanation for Eric and only served to cause even more confusion.

"I'll explain things more clearly when the doctor's finished," China added softly.



THE WARMTH of the day had given way to a chilly night, which made it difficult to keep the men warm. Those who lay recovering in the mansion house were the luckiest, while those who had the shelter of a tent above their heads were still considered to be somewhat privileged in comparison to the men who lay out on the grass and rocks in the cool night air. Campfires blazed brightly throughout the night to keep the men warm. Eric, China and Dr Rickman later found themselves huddled around one such campfire, China holding her bandaged wrist for comfort, while staring with a tired mind into the crackling sparks and flames. It was time to get some welcome rest as the relief corps took over duties for the night. Once the microchip had been surgically removed, it was the perfect opportunity for China to finally tell Eric and Dr Rickman about her past, which, ironically enough, was embedded in the future.

Hearing her describe her life in the future and giving details of technological advances far beyond their comprehension was unreservedly peculiar to both Eric and Dr Rickman. China informed them about the raging global war between citizens and governments over the control of time travel. She also told them about her decision to join the Red Cross, her search for her brother and the teleportation accident, leaving her stranded in space and time. It was a tremendous amount of information for a Victorian doctor and a soldier from the First World War to process.

Eric shared his account about how he too became trapped in time, but the part that China found the hardest to believe was that Eric had only become trapped after his death. Dr Rickman didn't seem to be the least bit fazed by such a revelation and further shocked China by mentioning at least two other people that he had met in the course of the war with similar circumstances. The two people had both died and seemingly become trapped in time, destined to live their days over and over again. What irked Dr Rickman the most about life's mysteries was the fact that even

death didn't seem to release people's souls from the grip of a time warp. Although he hadn't died, he too was trapped for all eternity in a war that simply repeated itself. It would appear that it was virtually impossible for him to return to his former life in space and time.

Eric went on to share the details about what happened seconds after the event, on that cold day in October 1916, when he was killed in action from shrapnel wounds. He said that his eyes lost focus and his mind blacked out as his heart stopped beating in his chest. After what seemed like a matter of seconds, Eric regained consciousness and opened his eyes to discover that it was the summer of 1915 once more, when he had first enlisted in the army and was posted in France.

Despite the daunting reality of their fate, China was somewhat relieved to hear of Eric and Dr Rickman's strange accounts of time slips and time warps. China felt at ease to know that she wasn't alone in her distress, and related her strange account of having gone to sleep one summer's night in 1916 and waking up the next morning in the winter of 1917.

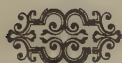
"There's just no logic to it all. Time doesn't seem to follow the rules," Eric commented with a perturbed look on his face.

"If there is one thing that I have learned over the years, it's that the world seems to become more peculiar as time goes by," replied Dr Rickman, his eyes transfixed on the glowing embers of the fire. His voice was the last thing on China's mind before she fell into a deep slumber, curled up on the ground next to the campfire.



CHAPTER 8

FREEDOM



With the break of dawn the next morning, a shard of golden sunlight illuminated China's peaceful face, rendering a rosy hue across her cheeks. Having gradually peeled her eyes open, she was alarmed to see that Eric and Dr Rickman were no longer by her side and bolted upwards, rapidly examining her surroundings. It wouldn't have been at all unusual for her to find that she had been transported to another place and time. It was unnerving to fall asleep each night wondering where and when she would end up the next morning. She was glad to see the familiar sight of the Gordon Mansion House and the army tents still standing in the same location as the night before. Relief washed over her when she caught sight of Eric. He was tilting a soldier's head up at an angle from the ground where he lay so he could sip water from a flask. Dr Rickman was already busy tending to the patients while pretty nurses, in dresses similar to ballgowns, seemed to flitter from patient to patient like bees whizzing from flower to flower. The length of their dresses trailing along the ground made it appear as if the women were floating instead of walking. The air was warm and dry, the horses were noisily making their presence known and the sun glimmered through the flourishing branches and thick

bushes, which filled the valley between the mountains. It could have been the start of a beautiful day, if it were not for the looming war.

Having spotted that China was stirring, Eric made his way over to her side, his face beaming from ear to ear. He winked at her as he bid her a good morning, which caused her stomach to flutter ever so slightly. It made no difference to China that Eric had a fiancée back home; she had no control over her feelings for him.

Dr Rickman happened to peer from out of the tent and beckoned China and Eric to join him inside. When they had both entered the tent, they noticed an oddly dressed young woman helping Dr Rickman. They were moving crates of medical supplies, which had just arrived, to the back of the tent. Eric, being the gentleman that he was, sprung forth to offer his assistance to the woman and attempted to take the crate from her arms. He was concerned that her frame looked far too delicate to be burdened with such a heavy load.

The instant that Eric put his hands on the crate, the woman pulled it closer towards her, out of his reach. She frowned like a school mistress at him and shrieked at the top of her voice with an American brawl, "Kindly remove your hands, young man! I'm quite capable of lifting a crate by myself, thank you!"

The woman turned sharply to continue her task, leaving Eric a little embarrassed and confused about what he had done wrong. It was when he put his head down that he noticed how oddly the woman was dressed compared with the other women. From her head to her waist she looked like any other woman in that time, but from the waist down, she stood out from all the rest. Instead of the traditional, long, fluffed-out, hooped skirt, she wore her skirt as high as her knees, with a bell-shaped cage underneath, which flared from the hips like any other dress, except for a pair of men's trousers underneath. Her clothing was dark navy in colour, which clashed with her black, lace-up ankle boots.

China was as shocked as Eric by the woman's abrupt manner, but Dr Rickman didn't appear to be at all surprised. Eric immedi-

ately felt as if he owed the woman an apology and didn't wait for her to turn around as he began to grovel.

"I'm really sorry, but I didn't think it was fitting for a nurse to carry such a heavy load. Please forgive me."

He was instantly satisfied that he had said the right thing, but was almost bowled over by the woman's reaction. The glass bottles rattled and clanked together as the woman fired the crate on the ground with sheer temper. She turned like a bull to a red rag to face the irritant that had just spoken.

"Just what is it that makes you think I'm a nurse? Perhaps it's because I'm a woman?" she spat, causing Eric's entire face to flush with humiliation. "Did it ever occur to you that I might actually be a doctor?" She didn't wait for Eric to reply and stormed out of the tent, almost trampling over some of the patients on her way.

Eric was utterly flabbergasted. China didn't quite know what to say to comfort him. It was Dr Rickman who broke the ice, laughing heartily as he spoke.

"You've just met my assistant surgeon, Dr Mary Walker. Feisty little thing, isn't she?"

Dr Rickman was still in the fits of laughter as China patted Eric affectionately on the back and exclaimed, "You've made a friend for life there! Not to worry, Eric; I still think you're a gentleman!" She smiled tenderly at him, holding his gaze until his frown gave way to a smirk.



ALL HANDS WERE on board that morning as more and more men presented themselves with all manner of illness. Malaria had taken its toll through the ranks. Many men had come down with typhoid from drinking the water at Crawfish Creek, while others had succumbed to the dry heat and were overcome by exhaustion and starvation. By late afternoon, the prospect of being shot was more of a threat to patients and medical staff alike. An order arrived from the chief physician to evacuate the hospital, as it was soon to

be under artillery bombardment. Patients who were severely ill or wounded were to be moved by ambulance and those who were not so badly off were to go by foot. It was a hasty operation, which could only be described as organised chaos. Doctors, nurses and soldiers were scurrying about like rats on a sinking ship, running this way and that, loading supply wagons with as much medical equipment and supplies as they could possibly carry. Patients were loaded into ambulances in cramped conditions. The horses were restless from all the commotion and became stubborn to manage. A small number of physicians remained behind to care for the hundreds of patients who were unfit to travel. Those who were fit to march on foot were armed with Spencer repeating rifles for protection. A procession of ambulances and supply wagons led the way, followed closely by soldiers and physicians, some on horseback and others on foot. China guessed that there were easily over fifteen hundred men on the march out of the camp and at least one thousand souls left behind.

Dr Rickman decided to remain at the camp to tend to the patients left behind. China and Eric also made the decision to remain behind so that they could be of assistance to the doctor. Eric was relieved to discover that Dr Walker had decided to evacuate the camp. It wasn't long after most of the Union soldiers had fled that the enemy stormed the camp. The Confederates were heavily armed with Colt revolving rifles and didn't hesitate to shoot anyone in their path. When bullets ran out, bayonets and swords were employed. Those few brave Union soldiers who stayed on to defend the hospital were no match for the impressive numbers of Confederate cavalry and infantry. Masses of men dressed in grey uniforms swarmed around the camp, looting everything worth taking, from blankets and ammunition to medical supplies. In all the pandemonium that ensued, Eric's concern for China's welfare was paramount. Brandishing a pistol that he carried on the inside pocket of his tunic, he led China into a tent, attempting to hide her from the enemy. He guarded her with his life, backing her into the corner of the tent, while he shot every

Confederate soldier who made a move towards her. Much to his horror, he soon ran out of bullets. Eric grabbed the nearest thing to hand in place of a weapon, which happened to be a dead Confederate's sword, and began to swing it at the next man, who had turned his attention towards the back of the tent at the sight of a vulnerable woman. China was prepared for the worst and trembled from head to toe, wielding a large surgical saw in her arms, ready to chop the head off any man who got too close to her. Eric braced himself as the scruffy-looking Confederate soldier charged at him wielding a bayonet. China's heart was doing summersaults as she realised that her life could be over in a flash. What happened next seemed to play out in China's mind in slow motion. As Eric swung the sword at the Confederate, his shoulder wound had caused him to miss, instantly giving his enemy the upper hand. Just as the Confederate plunged forth with his bayonet, the sound of a bullet bursting from its shell cut through the air like a knife. The Confederate dropped to the ground like a dead fly, much to Eric's relief. When the dust and gun smoke cleared, Dr Rickman could be seen from behind the Confederate's limp body, with his rifle still aimed in Eric's direction. The soldier's head had smacked against a wooden crate as he fell to the ground.

"It's a good job he's dead or he would have one massive headache in the morning," Dr Rickman sneered, as he checked the body for a pulse and coldly stepped across it.

China was astonished. "You killed him, but you're a doctor," she declared.

"Would you have preferred I let him attack you? I would think not," Dr Rickman responded in a defensive manner. "At least he wasn't one of my patients. Although I can think of one or two that I wouldn't miss!" Dr Rickman smirked as he spoke.

Eric looked to China with bemusement before unexpectedly lunging towards her, dragging her to safety as he noticed that the bottom corner of the tent had caught fire. Dr Rickman suddenly took on a serious disposition, instructing Eric and China to charge out of the tent like wild dogs, attacking the first Confederate they

saw on horseback, clearing the way for Dr Rickman to get a good shot at him. The plan was to steal two horses. Eric and China would ride away on the first horse and with a bit of luck, Dr Rickman would follow on a second one.

As terrifying as the plan was, China knew that there was little else they could do. She braced herself, armed with a medical saw, letting Eric lead the way with the bayonet that had almost maimed him. They hurtled forward in a frenzied rush of adrenaline with Dr Rickman hot on their heels. All three of them hollered loudly like wild tribesmen calling out in battle as they leapt outside of the tent. They were not in the position to notice the Confederate soldier who was standing to the side of the tent. As soon as he spotted the trio, he cocked his rifle and shot directly at them. The sound of the bullet shattered the air. Time seemed to stand still for just a fraction of a moment. China was the first to fall to the ground, finding herself in a mucky pit. Eric was the next to fall, followed closely by Dr Rickman. The doctor happened to have been carrying his medical bag with him and without any regard for his own safety, or any thought of the whereabouts of the Confederate who had shot at them, he instantly took hold of China and checked her over for wounds. It had all happened so quickly that China wasn't quite sure if she had actually been shot. She lay motionless, staring into Dr Rickman's eyes as he proceeded to examine her. He could find no trace of a gunshot.

Eric was the first to notice a sinister change in the atmosphere. At first his senses were startled by the daylight, appearing to become suddenly dimmer, as they fell into the mucky pit. The next strange occurrence was the distinct sound of machine-gun fire, which rippled through the air all around him. Lifting his head, it dawned on him that they were no longer at the Gordon House Field Hospital; they were lying in a freshly dug trench. The earthy smell of clay stung the back of Eric's nostrils. It was a familiar scent that he had become accustomed to throughout the Great War. Noticing a dramatic dip in the temperature, all three of them searched the heavens above and quickly concluded that they had

somehow, yet again, been transported in time and space. China was quick to point out that despite having dodged a bullet in the American Civil War, they had in fact jumped out of a frying pan and into a fire. No matter where China travelled in time and space, there seemed to be no escaping the ever-present danger of war.

Having spent so long in the trenches of France and Belgium during the Great War, Eric felt obligated to take charge of the situation and ordered China and Dr Rickman to keep their heads down and stay put as he manoeuvred around the trench to assess their situation and determine their exact location. Having studied a fair deal of history in her day, China understood Eric's caution. It was imperative that they could verify which side of the firing line they had landed on. Both China and Eric were aware that it would have been a most dangerous outcome to have landed in the middle of a German trench. Dr Rickman hadn't lived during the First World War, so he had no concept of what trench warfare entailed.

It had seemed like a long time since Eric had meandered around the corner of the trench to inspect their new territory. The whirr of machine-gun fire echoed throughout the atmosphere. China almost held her breath before Eric returned. Having peaked out over the top, Eric was a little perplexed to spot a lake and a great number of buildings surrounding their location. It seemed as though the trench had been erected in the middle of a park. The building that stood out the most was the one from which much of the gunfire was coming: the Shelbourne Hotel. Eric spotted the snipers on the roof of the hotel. He was certain that he wasn't on the German, French nor Belgian frontline.

Just as he returned to China and Dr Rickman, there was an unexpected lull in the gunfire. Then, for a few moments, there was silence. The snipers held their fire with the intention of locating further targets. The silence was soon broken by a surprising outburst of singing. It wasn't possible to decipher the lyrics of the song as the voices sung in a foreign language. Neither China nor Dr Rickman had ever heard the language before, but Eric had. He

was sure that the lyrics of the song were Irish. He was almost sure that he had heard the song before.

"It's the Irish National Anthem!" Eric declared, much to China and Dr Rickman's surprise.

Birds chirped as the singing continued for some time and the sky took on a heavenly bright glow, as the sun began to rise. China guessed that it was between four and five o'clock in the early hours of the morning. The sky was so beautiful to look at that it seemed out of context to the raging conflict below it. As he took in the scenery that surrounded him, Eric caught sight of a very prominent-looking building nearby: the Royal College of Surgeons. Eric knew from letters he had received from his fiancée in early May of 1916 that he was somehow standing in the middle of St Stephen's Green in Dublin in the throes of the Irish Rebellion, or the Easter Rising as it later became known. What alarmed Eric more than anything was the fact that he was standing in the midst of an Irish garrison dressed in a British uniform. He knew it was only a matter of time before he would be discovered.

Being a Victorian, Dr Rickman had no knowledge of World War I or the Irish Rebellion of 1916. He was oblivious to the additional danger that Eric faced as a British soldier at that very moment in time. China, on the other hand, had twigged the connection between the two conflicts and felt compelled to enlighten the doctor about their predicament.

"We really only have two options," Dr Rickman responded. "We surrender or get shot." He sighed before he continued. "We can't fight our way out of this with a bayonet, a saw, a rifle and two bullets, so I know which option I'm choosing."

"I don't think it will be as straight forward as that, Doctor," replied Eric, as China nodded her head in agreement.

"Well, if you two have a better idea I'd be delighted to hear it, but I really doubt you do," Dr Rickman retorted, leaning across Eric to get a grip of China's skirts as she squatted on the ground below the embankment. China was too taken aback to react

before the doctor continued to speak. "May I be so bold as to ask you to tear a strip off your white under garments, my dear?"

China was stunned at the request and failed to give a response. Dr Rickman's eyes narrowed as he held her startled gaze. He continued to stare into China's eyes and sniggered at her as he proceeded to rip at the bottom lining of her skirts with both hands. China let out a small yelp as he tore a large strip of white cloth from her garments. Eric looked on in shock as the doctor searched about the muddy ground for a suitable-sized twig on which to tie the strip of cloth.

"I hope this works out the way you planned it in your head, Doctor," Eric taunted as Dr Rickman grabbed hold of his medical bag and lifted the handmade, white flag high above the embankment of the trench, taking care to keep his head down just in case. Within moments, a rifle was cocked and aimed at the back of the doctor's head. He was instructed to turn around slowly with both hands up, which meant that he had to drop his bag.

"Well, what do we have ourselves here?" goaded a female soldier, pointing the rifle directly into the doctor's face.

China thought that the soldier's face looked familiar, but she couldn't place where she had seen her before. The soldier was standing at ground level above the trench looking down on the sorry sight below her.

"A Tommy as well!" exclaimed the soldier excitedly as she spotted Eric, swinging the barrel of the rifle in his direction as she eyed up his uniform with a look of disgust.

The female soldier standing above Eric was a sight for sore eyes. Despite her aggressive stance, Eric took the time to get a good look at the unusually clad lady. It was so very odd to see a woman dressed in a man's uniform. Her coat and her trousers, which were tucked into puttees, were bottle-green in colour. She wore a Sam Browne belt about her coat, which sported a high collar, two breast pockets and two box pockets. Her hair was rolled up and tucked neatly under a black, upturned slouch hat with a bunch of cocks' feathers hanging to the front.

"Please, don't shoot!" pleaded China. "We surrender!"

"That's probably not a bad idea, young lady, considering your pal here is wearing the wrong uniform to be part of our garrison."

The soldier didn't take her aim away from Eric for a moment, as she nodded to someone standing in the trench behind him.

"They surrender, Commandant Mallin, but I say we should just shoot this one!" the soldier declared with a glint of wildness in her eyes.

"That won't be necessary, Commandant Markievicz; they are prisoners of war now. We must abide by the code of ethics after all," announced Commandant Mallin, much to Eric's relief. China turned her head to get a good look at Commandant Mallin. He was an attractive-looking man, aged about forty, with thick, slightly greying hair and a distinctive moustache. He had the look of a family man about him, which gave China some peace of mind. Commandant Markievicz muttered something about having more mouths to feed and grimaced with the disappointment of her superior's decision. It was at that moment that China remembered where she had seen Commandant Markievicz before: in a history book.

"Countess Constance Markievicz!" China exclaimed loudly, almost in awe of the woman stood before her.

Commandant Markievicz was unimpressed by China's admiration for her and raised her eyebrows as she retorted, "And who might you be, young lady?"

"We're time travellers!" China blurted out without thinking.

Dr Rickman was amused by China's revelation and lowered his head to hide his laughter. Eric was in a more sombre mood, almost hanging on China's next word.

"We have come in peace and wish to assist you," China added, leading Eric to bury his face in his hands as he shook his head from side to side.

"If you've come in peace, why is he dressed in a British uniform?" inquired Commandant Markievicz as she poked Eric in the shoulder with the barrel of her rifle.

Eric dared not answer her question, for the simple reason that he didn't quite know how to.

Before Commandant Markievicz could interrogate her prisoners any further, a volley of machine-gun fire rained down upon the green from the rooftops of nearby buildings, prompting Commandant Markievicz to jump down into the grotty trench for cover. Following the trail of smoke from the gunfire that lingered in the air like a fading ghost, Eric spotted groups of British soldiers huddled on the roof of the Shelbourne Hotel. He found himself to be in a most impossible situation. There were at least one hundred and twenty members of the Irish Citizen Army in Commandant Mallin's garrison spread throughout the Green. They hid in trenches and crouched behind barricades of furniture, cars and scrap, lambasting the British soldiers with a rain of bullets. China, Eric and Dr Rickman hunkered down in the trench for cover while Commandant Mallin and Commandant Markievicz riddled anything in their path with bullets. Sparks and smoke circled their heads as the strong tang of sulphur hung in the air like an unwanted pest. China could almost taste the gunpowder as she crouched next to Commandant Markievicz.

Every so often Commandant Mallin and Commandant Markievicz took it in turns to slide down into the trench with their backs to the wall of the embankment to reload their ammunition.

One long and uncomfortable hour passed in the hostile environment. Eventually, Commandant Mallin deduced that it was no longer viable for his garrison to remain positioned at the green and decided to relocate to a nearby building: the Royal College of Surgeons. The short distance from the trench to the main door of the stony, grey building was a deadly trek. Bullets fell like rain as the rebels made their way across the street at intervals. When the time came for China, Eric and Dr Rickman to make their way across the street, they were followed closely by Commandant Markievicz with her rifle pointed at their backs. As they made their way to the Royal College of Surgeons, there were numerous

obstacles in their path, such as makeshift barricades, dead bodies and even dead animals. The corpses that littered the street included British soldiers, policemen, Irish rebels and civilians. Commandant Markievicz managed to fatally shoot a British policeman along the way, much to the horror of Eric. What made it all the more deplorable were her cries of, "I got him! I got him!" as she almost leapt with delight. Her tune soon changed as she got to the path outside the doorway of the college and noticed the carcass of a dead dog. She became infuriated and began to curse, which made Eric feel even more unsettled.



THE COLLEGE WAS AN ARCHITECTURALLY beautiful building inside. Its large hall was decorated with the most impressive of paintings and the lecture rooms were tastefully furnished throughout. Commandant Markievicz had led her prisoners from room to room as she explored their new headquarters, eventually taking them back into the main hall. She instructed a fellow female rebel to search the building for food, before ordering another female rebel to gather up mattresses, blankets and other supplies to set up bedding for the night in the main hall. Barricades were constructed in the entrance hall with books that had been taken from the library. A makeshift mortuary was set up in a lecture theatre to the rear of the building to prepare for the bodies that were eventually retrieved from the street. China, Eric and Dr Rickman had their hands bound by rope and were ordered to sit on the floor in the corner of the hall. Out of the three prisoners, Eric was the one who received the most negative attention from the rebel soldiers. They looked him up and down in a very cold and unsympathetic manner as if he were some class of insect, which, given the opportunity, they would have been happy to crunch under their boots.

As the day wore on, Eric became more and more anxious. His main concern was for China's welfare. They hadn't received any

food or water whatsoever, but neither had the rebels, as Dr Rickman pointed out. Windows had been smashed and the deafening rounds of gunshots echoed throughout the historic interior of the college. As daunting as it was to be held a prisoner under such conditions, China appreciated what a fantastically surreal experience it was to be part of such a historical moment.

Dr Rickman wasn't a man who stressed over anything in life and so he remained in a state of tranquillity, despite the bedlam that surrounded him. Even the sight of a young rebel standing on a wooden chair propped up on a table, tearing down a portrait of Queen Victoria didn't seem to ruffle the doctor's feathers at all. It did, however, infuriate Commandant Mallin, who threatened to have the perpetrator shot, until he realised that it was a young boy and therefore chose to heavily reprimand him instead. The commandant took the opportunity to remind his garrison that no unnecessary damage was to be caused to the building or its contents.

It was a miserable affair to spend hours on end tied up and helpless as the world was falling down around them. Circumstances changed, however, for China and Dr Rickman when their assistance was required with the increasing number of casualties. Eric remained bound and could only look on as China and Dr Rickman tended to the wounded men and women.

China was later escorted to a lecture room at the back of the building by a young rebel who appeared to be no older than sixteen. A roaring fire blazed from a large fireplace at the back wall, which was being used to cook porridge and make tea. China had been instructed to relieve one of the female rebels from her duties and help to prepare any food available. Rations were in short supply and all that was available to sustain the garrison was a diet of porridge and cream crackers. It was while China was hunkered down by the fire stirring the porridge that she overheard Commandant Markievicz chatting with another rebel. She was still gutted about the dead dog that she had encountered on the street and boasted that not one duck on the green had come to any harm

on her watch. She was proud of the fact and had acquired a small amount of respect for the enemy who had participated in a cease-fire with the rebels the previous day, allowing the caretaker access to the lake to feed the ducks! There was no mention of any of the dead soldiers or civilians strewn all over the street. China believed Commandant Markievicz to be the most singular lady she had ever met.



THAT NIGHT WAS uncomfortable for most, but was particularly rough for China, Eric and Dr Rickman, due to the primitive sleeping arrangements. There were not enough mattresses to go around by far. Soldiers of the lowest rank, as well as prisoners, were obliged to sleep on a bed of straw, scattered about the floor. It was a long, chilly night as China lay on the floor of the great hall, staring at the elaborately decorative, high ceiling with its pretty chandeliers hanging down. She fantasised about finding her brother and how they might escape the war, returning to life in their own timeline. But a fantasy was all it was. She had a new life now, one from which she could see no escape. She was destined to remain trapped in time, living in a perpetual state of war.

Eric was also finding it difficult to sleep, as he tried to make sense of all that he had experienced since he joined up for the war. Little did he know that the following day would see him being forced to produce homemade bombs for the rebels. The bombs or 'Rifle Cans', as they were known, were to be used as ammunition against his comrades.

China and Dr Rickman continued with their duties, preparing what little rations they had for the garrison and tending to the casualties. Eric spent most of the day filling old tins of Blaud's Health Salts and Bourneville Cocoa with gunpowder. The only warning to help maintain safety standards was a makeshift sign on the table, stating:

LIVE BOMBS

Every now and then, a bullet came whizzing through a window and ricocheted off the walls. One bullet very nearly hit the table at which Eric was working. He had no choice but to continue his deadly task and wondered how he had ever ended up in such a wacky situation.

Food and rations were in scarce supply, leaving the garrison weak with hunger. The rebels made a drastic decision to tunnel their way from the college to Grafton Street by breaking holes through the walls that divided each house along the way. Several women were burdened with the hazardous mission of foraging for food, dodging bullets through windows as they scarpered through the holes in the walls.

It wasn't until the early hours of the next morning that Dr Rickman made a bold and daring move. Using a scalpel from his medical bag, he cut through his bonds as most of the rebels lay sleeping. He had been biding his time for the right opportunity to make an escape. The doctor hastily cut through the rope around Eric's wrists before approaching China as she lay with her eyes shut, although not asleep. The doctor had taken his black, Victorian cloak from his medical bag and swung it about his shoulders to stave off the chill of the dawn. As China opened her eyes, she almost screamed out loud before realising that it was Dr Rickman who was standing over her. The doctor, wielding a scalpel in one hand, looked every inch like Jack the Ripper in his long, gothic-looking cloak, carrying his medical bag. Dr Rickman smiled sweetly at her before he kneeled to free her from her bonds. She didn't dare question the doctor for fear of waking the rebels, who lay snoring nearby.

Eric had taken the liberty of stealing two revolvers from the rebels while they slept and handed one of them to Dr Rickman as he led the way. Ever so quietly, Eric and China followed the doctor as he clambered over the rough brickwork and rubble, scrambling through each empty shell of a house via the gaping holes in the

walls. It was almost too easy to make such a daring getaway. The thought of being shot didn't enter their heads as they made their way through the tunnel to freedom.

As they entered the last house on the block, they could see the morning light beaming through the gable wall leading out onto the street. They were completely unprepared to hear the click of a rifle being cocked within close proximity. A second click followed immediately, causing China's heart to race. Two British soldiers with cockney accents made themselves known. One was tall and thin with flushed cheeks, while the other was short and stubby with bad teeth. It was the short, stubby-looking soldier who did all the talking.

"Stop right where you are, drop your weapons and turn around slowly with your hands in the air."

The soldier's voice was intimidating as he almost spat the words out of him. It would have been futile not to obey his command and so both Eric and Dr Rickman simultaneously dropped their arms before turning to face the music. China also turned around, dreading the consequences of their actions. The soldiers were not expecting to see that one of their captives was toggled out in a British uniform and yet they were not so easily convinced that he was one of them.

"Name and rank?" the stubby soldier demanded as he quickly eyed the stripes on Eric's shoulders and pointed the barrel of the rifle at Eric's forehead.

Clearly intimidated by the weapon shoved in his face, Eric hesitated slightly before replying, "Second Lieutenant Eric Applebee."

"Long way from the frontline now, Lieutenant, ain't ya?" mocked the soldier as he squinted his eyes at Eric, giving a clear signal for his distrust of him. "What brings you to town, Lieutenant?"

Eric began to panic a little inside, which showed as he started to stutter, "I ... I ... I was posted here ..." Eric didn't sound very convincing, even to himself.

"Where are you based?" enquired the soldier.

Eric went blank.

"Where are you based?" the soldier repeated his question, this time yelling it into Eric's face.

"What's this?" the tall, thin soldier interrupted as he stooped to lift Eric's weapon from the ground. "Since when were British soldiers issued with German revolvers?"

"I stole it from the Irish," Eric speedily replied. "They took us as prisoners a number of days ago and I stole two of their revolvers before we escaped."

"That may be, Lieutenant, but it still doesn't explain what you're doing here in the first place, which leads me to believe that you're a deserter." The soldier was growing angry now and yelling loudly into Eric's face. "You thought you could hide out the rest of the war in Ireland, while the rest of our boys are getting themselves blown to bits in France."

"No, you don't understand," Eric pleaded.

"Well, explain it to me, Lieutenant," insisted the stubby soldier.

"This one's a doctor by the looks of it," the thin soldier once more interrupted as he searched through the doctor's bag. "Bit of an old-fashioned-looking geezer, ain't ya?" the soldier stated as he looked the doctor up and down, noting how out of date his appearance was. "Who's the pretty missus?" the soldier almost drooled as he studied China's face, his foul breath turning China's stomach as he stood too close for comfort.

"Forget the girl," instructed the stubby soldier. "Search the lieutenant."

Eric wasn't exactly fazed by the soldier's desire to search him, feeling that he had nothing to hide. He stood with his legs hip distance apart as the thin soldier swiftly frisked him from head to toe, before ordering him to remove his tunic. Eric wasn't at all prepared for the soldier's reaction to what he had found in his inside pocket. The soldier confiscated a black and white photo of Eric's fiancée and the letters that he had received from her while stationed in France. It was the dates on the postmark of the

envelopes that first drew the soldier's attention to the content of the letters.

May 1916 ... June 1916 ... July 1916

"That's not possible," the soldier muttered as he pointed some of the postmarks out to the stubby soldier, who continued to aim his rifle at Eric's head. The soldier began rapidly scanning through the pages of the letters. Although it was obvious from the content that they were love letters from Eric's betrothed, it occurred to the soldier that the letters may have been proof that Eric was in fact a spy. Not only was his fiancée Irish, but there was plenty mentioned about the Easter Rebellion throughout a bunch of letters dated May 1916. It made no sense to the two British soldiers that the letters had been posted in the future. They were baffled by the detailed accounts of what was yet to happen during the rebellion. One letter mentioned how Pádraig Pearse surrendered at the GPO after almost a week of fighting. The most astonishing letter of all, however, gave a detailed account of the rebel leaders who had apparently already been rounded up and executed! The stubby soldier was mystified by the fact that the letters had been written and posted at some stage in the not too distant future.

"Lieutenant Applebee, I am arresting you on suspicion of espionage ..." The stubby soldier's mouth continued to flap open, but Eric's mind had blocked out the rest of his words. China and Dr Rickman were also arrested and all three sorry-looking souls were marched out onto Grafton Street in the cool morning air.

The streets were completely deserted of civilians. Buildings throughout the city lay in ruins, some reduced to piles of crumbled bricks and rubble. As they marched through the streets on the way to Kilmainham Gaol, they were treated to a time traveller's guided tour through the mayhem that was Dublin in 1916. The remains of overturned trams that had been burnt out, added to the apocalyptic impression that hung in the air like a bad stench. Some buildings had been badly burned overnight and fires still raged

from the incendiaries that had been fired the night before. The occasional gunshot rang out over the city, but the shooting was nowhere near as frantic as it had been over the previous few days. It was mostly British soldiers they had encountered on the streets closest to the gaol. The sun was beginning to glimmer through the clouds as if attempting to tease the prisoners with its heavenly promise of freedom. The blissful morning sky was a stark contrast to the gloomy bulk of a building, which loomed over them with menace as they entered the wrought iron gates.

China could feel the ominous presence of the sinister structure boring into her mind. She glared at its depressing, grey, limestone walls with wrought iron bars blocking out the sparse light that entered the cells, through the small slits that served as windows.

If the outer walls of the prison were disheartening, the dank, dismal cells inside were completely miserable. Standing in the main prison hall, China was overwhelmed by the sights and sounds in the ether. It was a truly amazing encounter to experience life as a prisoner during this period of history. It was bewildering that at such a wretched moment in her life like this, she had the ability to look at her life through the eyes of a time travelling tourist. Her senses heightened as she became immersed in the moment, trying to take it all in: the solid sound of the soldiers' boots on the wooden floorboards; the jangling of the prison guard's keys as he led them up the cast-iron staircase to the third storey; the neat rows of cells on either side of the staircase with their timber-battened doors.

A stale dusty odour hit their noses as all three prisoners were led into the same squalid cell. It was a cold, dark and dreary chamber, certainly not spacious enough for three people. Bedding consisted of a wooden base at floor level, suitable to sleep one person only. Straw had been generously scattered in the corner of the cell, opposite the wooden base, to accommodate additional prisoners. The only source of light was a tiny window fitted with wrought iron bars overlooking the infamous Stonebreakers' Yard – the scene of countless executions since the gaol's early days.

There was nothing for the three weary souls to do except sit and talk. Dr Rickman remarked on the irony of becoming trapped in time only to find that they now had so much time on their hands.

As night fell, a single candle was the only source of light and heat within the cell. As the gentle wind drifted through the bars of the window, the flame from the candle flickered, causing shadows to dance upon the walls. When they had tired of talking at the dead of night, they sat silently gazing at the shadows as they moved across the messages etched on the walls. Although the plaster was crumbling from the walls, decades of graffiti from previous prisoners was clearly visible. Political and religious messages, prisoners' names, dates and messages of hope and freedom adorned the small room.

China huddled on the wooden base while Eric and Dr Rickman lay upon the straw, leaning against the wall. The doctor removed his cape and draped it around China's petite body to spare her from the cold air. The sound of two mice scuttling past the cell door wasn't at all comforting to her as she lay with her eyes shut tight, trying to force herself to sleep. She tried her best to block out the din of other prisoners as they shouted obscenities at the guards and pulled the doctor's cloak up about her face, trying to diminish the fusty stench of the cell. Her stomach rumbled with hunger, having refused to eat the dried-up potatoes and stirabout provided by the prison guard earlier that evening.



THE NEXT FEW days went by in a haze. The daily routine of prison life was beginning to take its toll on all three of them. The food was extremely unappetising and conditions were unhygienic. Dr Rickman suspected that one of the prisoner's in the next cell was suffering from tuberculosis and deduced that it was only a matter of time before one or all of them fell ill.

The daily walk around the exercise yard served more as a tease

to the prisoners, as it only reminded them of the freedom that they had been denied.

Three gruelling days passed by before the rising was quelled. Over the next few days, China was astonished to recognise some familiar faces from the history books that she had read as they were paraded past her cell: Michael Mallin, Countess Markievicz, Pádraig Pearse, James Connolly and Thomas Clarke.

Looking out through the bars of the tiny window each day was a waking nightmare as they observed the executions taking place in the Stonebreakers' Yard. The darkest day of all for China was the day of Eric's execution. He stood wrongly accused of being a spy and hadn't even been granted a trial.

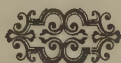
"Please don't do this," China pleaded with the prison guards. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she clawed at one of their arms while they were escorting Eric from his cell. "He's done nothing wrong."

Dr Rickman's expression was that of sympathy, as he took a step forward towards China. He reached out his hand in her direction as if to touch her but all he grasped was air.

"Take good care of her, Doctor," was all Eric had the chance to say as there was a brief moment of delay while the prison guards stalled to close the cell door behind him. Eric's gaze was fixated upon China who was now kneeling in despair on the ground, wailing, as she buried her head in her arms. Eric's face was ashen with anxiety as he was marched away. Several long minutes dragged by before Dr Rickman saw Eric being lead out into the execution yard. He pressed his face against the bars of the window to get a closer view. China couldn't bear to watch the horrendous act and cried loudly upon Dr Rickman's shoulders as he held her tightly in his arms, crouching on the floor of the cell. Eric had died instantly, moments after the gunshot had ripped through the air. China felt utterly hopeless. She knew that the same fate awaited her and that there was no escape. When her tears had subsided, she looked to the graffiti on the wall. The word etched onto the wall that caught her immediate attention was *Freedom*.



CHAPTER 9
MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE



THE last thought on Eric's mind that mild summer's morning, as he was shot, wasn't of his fiancée, Maureen, but of China. China's dark blue eyes bore into his head before the bullet had erased them. It wasn't until after his death that he realised how his feelings for China had developed.

Standing in the miserable cell with her eyes shut tightly, China wept quietly as she pined for Eric. It was only just as he stood behind her and placed his hand upon her shoulder that he felt truly attracted to her.

Dr Rickman was still holding her tightly to comfort her. Feeling the weight of an extra hand placed upon her, she opened her eyes and pulled away from the doctor, turning to look over her shoulder. It made no sense at all to see Eric standing behind her. It made even less sense when she realised that the floor of the cell had become soft and slushy underneath her feet. Within the blink of an eye, the walls of the cell had been replaced by the familiar-looking sides of a deep trench.

"What's happening? ... How are you still alive? ... I don't understand!" The bewilderment was clearly visible on China's face as she spoke.

"You can't possibly be as surprised as I am, China!" Eric exclaimed as he grabbed hold of her and hugged her tightly. "This is the third time I've died and managed to survive it!"

"Well, don't make a habit of it!" China jested as they continued to cuddle each other, while Dr Rickman studied his new surroundings, trying to get his bearings once again.

"Are we still in Dublin?" enquired the doctor, deliberately interrupting the smitten pair.

Just then a soldier's head peered out from the doorway of a bunker, close to where Dr Rickman was standing. The doctor was perplexed by the sudden alarm that had spread across Eric's face. It was the distinct, grey, German Army helmet that Eric had recognised that had caused him to fill with dread. Before Eric could react, the soldier stepped out of the bunker in full view. His grey uniform confirmed what Eric already knew; he was the enemy. The First World War was still in full swing and they had landed on the wrong side of the frontline.

"Bitte nicht schiessen! Bitte nicht schiessen!" the German repeated in a state of panic as he slowly approached the three stunned onlookers.

Although Eric couldn't speak German, it became obvious that the man wasn't an immediate threat. The nervous German soldier, who appeared to be unarmed, came out of the bunker trembling with his hands in the air.

A most unexpected scene unfolded as the German soldier fell to his knees and began to cry like a child, rocking himself back and forth. It was obvious to Dr Rickman that the soldier was suffering from severe shock and his natural reaction was to come to his aid. As he knelt beside the distraught soldier to loosen his collar and examine him, Eric was slightly taken aback.

"What are you doing, Doctor? He's German!" Eric blurted out.

"What does being German have to do with anything?" quizzed the doctor with a baffled expression. Eric then twigged the fact that the doctor had no concept of what the First World War was about, meaning that he saw no harm in their current situation.

"Leave him be, Doctor," Eric requested. "He's an enemy."

The doctor wasn't the type of man who was prone to taking instruction from anyone and protested at Eric's forwardness.

"I don't care what side of the war he is backing. I treat all casualties alike." Dr Rickman's features were as stern as his manner when he became irritated.

"That's fine by me, Doctor, but we're in a great deal of danger right now. We really need to figure out how to get out of here fast without getting ourselves killed."

The doctor acknowledged Eric's caution, but remained crabby with him.

"I don't know why you're so worried about being killed when you've already died so many times," Dr Rickman snapped, making a rather poor attempt at humour.

If they hadn't found themselves in such a perilous position, Eric would have had the time to explain that death was actually quite a painful process to endure and not exactly the type of experience one would wish to repeat unnecessarily.

The doctor proceeded to reach into his medical bag to search for his stethoscope, but was distracted by the swish of a finely tipped, wooden arrow whizzing past him. The arrow narrowly missed his head. Swiftly turning to face his foe, Dr Rickman's reflexes kicked in sharply as he ducked a further two consecutive arrows aimed at his head. The archer was standing at the foot of the parapet, high above the trench, dressed in the most unusual attire. His torso was draped in a dull brown and earthy green material like sack cloth, tied up at the front with string. A wide, brown leather belt clung to his waist and his legs were covered by what appeared to be a pair of ill-fitting stockings. He was a middle-aged man of slender build with deep bags hanging under his eyes, long shoulder-length, scraggly hair and a scruffy beard. China's first impression brought Robin Hood to mind: a mythical character in English folklore from a book she had read in her grandfather's library. Unlike Eric, Dr Rickman wasn't too troubled by the probability of being slain and so he stood erect, facing the archer,

scowling at him, as if attempting to prove his fearlessness. Eric couldn't believe the doctor's audacity and recklessness. As Eric lunged forward, throwing himself in front of the doctor to block any further arrows, the archer faded ever so gently into nothingness before China's unbelieving eyes.

The ground beneath their feet began to vibrate and rattle with a sudden thunderous clatter, which saturated the air all around them. The doctor was no longer concerned about the incapacitated German soldier, but was distracted by the fact that he was finding it difficult to keep his balance. Eric grabbed hold of China's arm in a rough manner and dragged her to safety as he spotted a crack forming in the mucky earth beneath her feet. Fearing that the walls of the trench might collapse inwards on top of them, Eric pushed China up against the parapet to climb over the top and suggested that the doctor should quickly follow suit. Dr Rickman suddenly forgot all about his patient and hastily scampered up across the parapet after Eric. A thick drape of fog engulfed them, making it tricky to find their way. As soon as all three of them had climbed out of the trench, the great noisy racket suddenly ceased and the ground finally stopped shaking. Eric led the hazardous trek across No Man's Land towards the Allies' frontline. An eerie silence pressed down upon them as they clambered across the jagged rocks and wiry grass. The further they ventured, the more impenetrable the fog became, until it was practically impossible to see what lay ahead. China stumbled as she ran directly into a half-decomposed corpse that lay huddled on the ground. She stalled for a moment, shocked by the sight of the British soldier who was missing an arm and a leg on one side. The next corpse in their path was that of a knight dressed in a full suit of chainmail armour. His sword was drawn as he clenched a deathly hold of it in his right hand. He wasn't wearing any protective headgear and a gunshot wound to the forehead could clearly be seen as he lay facing upwards with his eyes still open. The blood still trickling down his face seemed to indicate that his death had occurred just moments before. His sturdy-looking, white horse lay dead beside him. There

was no time to comment on the bizarre nature of the event and so they continued to bolt away from the menace of the German trench.

The atmosphere became charged with electricity as dark, inky clouds flooded and merged with the fog, like paint from a dirty paintbrush dipped into a jar of water. Lightning sizzled as it meandered through the filthy clouds that hung heavily overhead. The atmosphere grew dark and cold. China struggled to keep up with Eric and Dr Rickman, and deliberately began to slow her pace to catch her breath. Eric looked back to check on her and came to an abrupt halt, horrified to see the outline of a German soldier looming beside her. The fog and clouds began to part around her as the soldier took a grip of her arm. Eric called out her name as he ran back towards her. Dr Rickman was oblivious to the danger of the situation. China wasn't quite sure how to react to the soldier as he smiled oddly at her and attempted to hand her a lit candle. He said something in German, which she didn't understand. He then repeated it before Eric had the chance to reach him.

"Frohe Weihnachten!" The soldier continued to smile as he articulated the meaningless words, all the while urging China to take the candle from his hands.

"Merry Christmas!" the soldier uttered with a distinct German accent.

Eric stared at the soldier in disbelief and before he had the opportunity to react, he suddenly found that they were surrounded by German soldiers. They were circled by a whole troop of grey uniforms. Much to Eric's confusion, instead of wielding weapons, the Germans were carrying small pine trees adorned with lit candles. A crisp frost had glazed the grass and rocks under their feet and the great vault above was aglow with sparkling stardust, scattered across the heavens. A football bounced against a large rock and rolled along the crusty frost, landing at Eric's feet. A barrage of soldiers ran towards him in a mischievous manner, all racing to get hold of the ball. The familiar sight of his fellow comrades mingling with the German soldiers, laughing and frolick-

ing, instantly jolted Eric's memory back to accounts he had heard of the unofficial Christmas truce of 1914. Some of his army pals had witnessed the magical moment in time when temporary cease-fires were held between German and British soldiers up and down the lines to celebrate Christmas. Hundreds of soldiers, both German and British, gathered around, singing carols and exchanging cigarettes, cigars and chocolate. It was surreal to witness soldiers on both sides of the war showing their enemies black and white photos of their loved ones back home.

China had of course read about this enthralling moment and again felt truly privileged to witness such an event. The scent of pine needles hung in the cool night air and transported her mind back to those cosy, warm Christmases by the fireside with her grandfather.

The festive gathering came to an abrupt end as a stream of helicopters burst forth from the sky, hovering nosily over the bewildered soldiers. The incident was completely out of time and place, and managed to send both sides scurrying for their own trenches, dropping candles and Christmas trees as they ran. Dr Rickman was the only soul who stood still, staring wide-eyed at the incredible beasts that levitated in the air. It was an extraordinary sight for a Victorian to take in, seeming only to be possible through the power of witchcraft.

Shots were fired from the helicopters, which gave rise to retaliation from both the British and the Germans. The war was back on.

As soon as both sides proceeded to carry on fighting, the mysterious cluster of helicopters flew off into the night sky until they were completely out of sight.

It seemed so wrong to Eric that his comrades were shooting at soldiers whom only moments before had been celebrating Christmas with them.



DAYS DRAGGED by and the men grew wearier, chilled to the bone in the snow-filled hollows of the trenches. Eric became occupied with his military duties while China and Dr Rickman were engaged in caring for the wounded.

The arrival of New Year's Eve was a sobering milestone for the men. The realisation had hit home that the war hadn't been settled by Christmas as people believed it would be. Facing the dawn of a new year with no prospect of returning home to greet loved ones was a demoralising state of affairs.

Although each moment was a struggle to survive, it was evident at times that the human spirit couldn't be broken. Despite their bleak circumstances, the men continued to mark the New Year celebrations in any way they possibly could.



CHINA, Eric and Dr Rickman had wound up in a trench in Fleurbaix, a French village three miles south of Armentières. One part of the trench was home to an old and slightly out of tune piano that had been dumped in a nearby field. The men had carted the instrument across the field and positioned it in the widest section of the trench to cheer the men up! At quieter times, when the Germans had quit their firing for the night, the piano could be heard a good mile or so down the line. It was surprising how many excellent piano players the army happened to have. Of course, from time to time, some disapproving Germans expressed their dislike of the music by firing a few rounds in the direction of the music.

New Year's Eve was marked accordingly by a number of men taking turns to play their version of 'Auld Lang Syne', which brightened up the mood as the men sang along to filter out the din of enemy fire.

Though the presence of the piano in the trench was a novelty, the real treat for the men was a gramophone, complete with a set of records, which, accompanied by a tattered settee, had been

acquired from a derelict house nearby. It was almost comical to have a piano on one end of the trench and a gramophone and settee further down the line. But the men were rather pleased with their collection of homeware and it gave them something interesting to write about in their letters back home.

It was late in the evening when China began to feel unwell. Dr Rickman had noticed her pausing for more breaks than usual and clutching at her chest from time to time. Feeling dizzy and faint, she flopped down on the settee, which happened to be unoccupied at the time. Dr Rickman had been watching her closely and followed her to the settee, fixing his stethoscope in his ears as he approached her. He didn't speak a word as he began unbuttoning her blouse. China was too weak to pay any heed and lay still on the settee as the doctor proceeded to examine her. She didn't notice the look of concern on the doctor's face as he listened to her heartbeat. He checked her wrist for a pulse and then checked the vein in her neck before listening to her heartbeat once again. It was then that he noticed the perfectly square patch above her left breast, resembling a small door carved into her skin. The doctor was intrigued and began to prod and poke at the square patch of skin until the little door popped open. It was surprising enough to find a small door carved into a person's chest, but what Dr Rickman discovered inside the door fascinated him even more. Despite his lifetime of medical knowledge and the fact that he was a highly regarded physician of his time, he had never in his life witnessed a mechanically operated heart, which functioned with gears and cogs. He was spellbound and spent a moment just gazing at the wonder before his eyes. It was a real first for a Victorian doctor.

"Magic!" was all the doctor could say, repeating the word several times.

China was in a state of semi-consciousness, yet she was aware of the doctor's presence and clutched at his hand.

"My locket," she tried to explain. "The key ... it's in my locket."

Dr Rickman took hold of the locket, which hung from China's

neck, and opened it up. He was amused to find a small windup key inside, which he correctly assumed was used to wind up her mechanical heart.

"Please tell me if I'm hurting you, my dear," Dr Rickman spoke softly, trying to be gentle with her, as he reached his fingers inside her chest to insert the silver key. The resistance was strong as he turned the key and he found that he had to put pressure on it to make it turn. He wound it for several seconds at a time, while taking occasional breaks to check her pulse and listen to her heart-beat. After three or four minutes, when he was happy with her vitals, he placed the silver key back inside her locket and helped her to sit up.

"Thank you, Doctor," China said as she started to fix her clothes back up. "I had forgotten to wind my heart up recently ... I guess I've been a little preoccupied lately."

Dr Rickman sat down on the settee next to China and marvelled at the future of medicine. His mind was captivated by the endless possibilities of technological and scientific breakthroughs in medicine, which lay hidden within the folds of time.

"You really should meet my grandfather someday, Doctor. He's the most remarkable inventor," China stated.

Dr Rickman smiled warmly at her.

"I ought to say that it would be impossible to meet a man who will not be born for centuries, but lately I am beginning to think that anything is possible."

Dr Rickman stood up as he spoke and looked up to the heavens to take in the beauty of the starlit night. He leaned on the armrest of the settee where China was sitting and hunkered down close to her, pointing out the various constellations. China was enjoying the doctor's company when Eric made an appearance. He rested his rifle against the walls of the embankment, before inviting himself to sit on the settee beside China, bringing an instant end to the astrology lesson.

"Look what I managed to get us for the celebrations tonight," declared Eric excitedly as he began to root through the inside

pockets of his tunic before producing two cigars, a bottle of French wine and a slab of chocolate.

Just then, the enchanting echo of an opera song glided along the air throughout the dugout, like a nightingale rejoicing after being released from the captivity of a rusted cage for the very first time.

"Truly beautiful," commented Dr Rickman as he tilted his head up to the heavens and closed his eyes while sighing deeply.

China had spent the last few days working very closely with the doctor and was beginning to admire the man. She wondered what deep thoughts he harboured as he listened pensively to the haunting melody.

"May I have this dance, my lady?" Eric extended his hand to China as he stood up. China blushed a tad and rose to her feet, taking hold of his hand. As he held her closely in his gentle grip, she felt as if she were a feather floating along on a balmy summer's breeze, a stark contrast to the crunch of the powdery snow beneath their feet. But she didn't seem to feel the cold and rested her head upon his shoulder, unable to stop herself from beaming, while she gazed up at the glistening jewels in the sky above.

The sweet voice of the great polish opera singer, Marcella Sembrich, could be heard singing Bellini's 'Casta Diva.'

Eric whispered gently into China's ear, revealing the meaning of the beautiful Italian words. China listened with interest to the story of Norma, a high priestess who had been implored by druids to declare war on Rome. Norma tried to dissuade the druids from going to war, believing that there was no need to fight as Rome would eventually fall.

China was lost in the moment, while Dr Rickman watched on with a half-hearted smile, absorbed once again in his own thoughts. Powdery snowflakes began to drift gently down upon the dancing couple, who were surrounded by darkness except for the soft glow of candles and oil lamps scattered along the sides of the dugout. The stars fought their way through the occasional break in the clouds. For a few brief moments, the dugout had somehow

transformed itself into a fairy-tale fortress, as wisps of snowflakes softly descended upon the prince and his princess while they danced. The romance was soon shattered by the blast of the first shell to hit the dugout.

The Germans didn't seem to have any appreciation for the sweet opera music that echoed across No Man's Land and began to make a little music of their own by waging an almighty siege. Being exposed in the widest part of the trench, China, Eric and Dr Rickman hurriedly made their way to the nearest bunker. All serious casualties had been cleared off earlier that day to the casualty clearing station and nearby field hospitals, allowing China and Dr Rickman to take some time out. Eric had been taking a well-earned break, as he had been on night duty for a whole week and had received very little sleep in between.

The bunker was dimly lit by one candle on a table in the far corner. China and Eric sat themselves down on the empty ammunition crates that were stacked around the wooden table. Dr Rickman preferred to stand and began to slowly pace the floor of bunker, while deep in thought. The roof of the shelter shook dirt and gravel loose with every close bombardment. Eric poured wine into three tin mugs that he had managed to acquire. Midnight came and all three of them rang in the New Year together with a toast.

"Here's to nineteen fifteen again!" cheered Eric with a grin, reaching for the two cigars he had been hoarding for the occasion.

China didn't mind the sweet-scented smoke as its comforting aroma reminded her of something pleasant and yet she wasn't quite sure what it was.

"Here's to the absence of those who are dear to us," said Dr Rickman with a dismal expression on his face, adding a solemn tone to the celebrations. China could clearly see that the doctor was feeling somewhat despondent and quickly changed the subject. She proceeded to bring the doctor up to speed on the major historical events leading up to 1915. Eric gave a brief yet

concise account of European history as he knew it, while giving his two cents' worth about the main cause of the Great War.

"Well, you have just explained the start of the war," Dr Rickman exclaimed, nodding in Eric's direction. He turned his gaze towards China and sighed before he continued, "but you, my dear, could perhaps tell us how it ends."

China was caught unawares and paused a moment before breaking the news that the war wasn't to end until 1918. Eric was thrilled to hear of the Allies' victory, but disappointed to learn of their return to war some twenty-one years later. Dr Rickman was rather fascinated by his future history lesson and bombarded China with question after question.

"I'm sure you'll agree with me, Eric, that it wouldn't be for the best to share this information with your fellow comrades. It could be a devastating blow for them to realise that they must fight on for years to come." China leaned across the table and gently touched Eric's arm as she spoke.

An hour had passed since midnight and the guns had fallen silent on both sides of the front. China began to talk about her future life and mentioned how she longed to be able to let her grandfather know where she was and how she was doing. She knew that it was impossible to send him a message, as he wouldn't be born for centuries.

"Well, there really is no time like the present as they say," remarked the doctor, causing China and Eric to raise their eyebrows. "Why don't you simply contact your grandfather?" Dr Rickman suggested.

China was surprised by how insensitive the doctor could be.

"I think we all know why I can't, Dr Rickman," responded China with a look of shock on her face. "If I thought it were possible, I would have done so already."

"Oh, but it is possible, my dear. I can show you how if you wish," stated Dr Rickman, haughtily pursing his lips together.

"Of course I want you to show me, Doctor!" exclaimed China, anxious to make contact with her grandfather immediately.

Although he was fairly sceptical, Eric hoped that the doctor wouldn't disappoint China. Much to Eric's amusement, Dr Rickman instructed China to step outside the bunker and find a medium-sized stone that would fit in the palm of her hand. While China was busy searching for a suitable stone, both Eric and Dr Rickman got on with the task of ripping up sheets of writing paper into small squares. They proceeded to draw out the letters of the alphabet along with the words 'Yes' and 'No' on each square. By the time China had returned to the bunker, she was alarmed to discover a homemade Ouija board scattered across the wooden table with an upturned tin mug in the centre in place of a planchette. The candle had been moved to a wooden bench along the back wall.

"Are we having a séance, Doctor?" China quizzed with an air of innocence about her.

Dr Rickman laughed at the idea of it and reassured her that his intentions were not to contact dead spirits. He informed her, however, that on occasions the dead had in fact been known to make contact through the Ouija board. This wasn't very reassuring to her and she swallowed very hard before sitting down at the table. Dr Rickman explained that there were several methods that could be employed to contact those on the other side. He felt it was particularly important to point out that not everyone on the other side was actually dead. The majority of those that he had made contact with in the past were alive and well, but dwelled in another time. The most effective form of communication between differing timelines was of course the practice of what the doctor referred to as energy projection. It involved mentally projecting one's energy to a particular time and place in the universe, so that an apparition of the person's energy would materialise. It was an extremely difficult task to perform and often resulted in mixed signals when not carried through successfully. Those who witnessed such apparitions never seemed to understand the messages being conveyed and believed that they were victims of hauntings, often calling on religious orders to perform exorcisms.

The doctor himself had never personally tried to make contact in this way, but had observed others who had. It seemed to drain a person's energy, leaving them feeling weak for a long time after. Dr Rickman, instead, preferred the use of parlour tricks to make a connection. Eric, China and the doctor joined hands as they sat around the table, which had been converted into a makeshift Ouija board.

"China, my dear, if you are ready, we will begin by sending images and thoughts to your grandfather. You need not worry about frightening him, as we shall send messages in his dreams while he is sleeping," the doctor explained.

China was slightly nervous, but excited at the same time.

"We must each place one hand on the top of the mug in the centre of the table. We need to concentrate on breaking through the barriers of time and space to make a connection with your grandfather. You must believe it to achieve it. Are you ready, my dear?" The doctor awaited China's nod of approval before he continued. "Visualise your grandfather's face in your mind's eye as you spell out words of your choice to convey images in his dreams. You will spell the words out while Eric and I will project our thoughts and energy onto the planchette as it moves around the table. Keep your messages brief and use words instead of full sentences to convey meaning."

Dr Rickman smiled reassuringly at China and remained silent, waiting for her to make her move. China drew a deep breath before guiding the planchette around the table to spell her name out, letter by letter.

C-H-I-N-A

She could see her grandfather's image in her mind as she pushed the planchette to its destination. She paused a moment after spelling her name, before proceeding to spell out more messages:

*I-M/S-A-F-E**S-E-A-R-C-H-I-N-G/F-O-R/M-A-D-D-O-X*

Dr Rickman broke China's concentration by instructing her to tap the table hard three times with the stone she was holding in her other hand. He informed her that the reason behind it was to wake her granddad from his sleep so they could make further communication. When she had finished tapping, the doctor told her to think of a particular object or area in her grandfather's house and spell it out with the planchette. She didn't have to think very long before she spelled the word:

F-I-R-E-P-L-A-C-E

The idea was that China's grandfather would hear her knocking, wake up and immediately feel drawn to go to the fireplace.

"This is where it gets interesting!" Dr Rickman exclaimed. "Now we will have two-way communication. You will receive vague messages from your grandfather via the Ouija board and you can answer his questions by tapping the stone on the table: one tap for yes and two taps for no. Your grandfather will be able to hear the tapping coming from the fireplace."

"Just as a poltergeist taps?" quizzed China, enthralled by the idea of it.

"Precisely," confirmed the doctor.

China began the conversation by tapping the stone three times on the table and waiting eagerly for a response. About thirty seconds or so dragged by when China gazed wide eyed into the doctor's face.

"Nothing's happening," China stated with a look of utter disappointment spread across her delicate face. Eric felt her frustration.

"Give him time," Dr Rickman insisted and with that, the tin mug that they had been using as a planchette became noticeably warmer to the touch. At first the planchette began to vibrate,

before sliding slowly towards the letter 'I' and picking up speed as it moved on to other letters.

I-S/A-N-Y-O-N-E/T-H-E-R-E?

The planchette spelled out the words of its own accord. Incredibly, China's grandfather had made a connection with her. China proceeded to knock once on the table with the stone, before spelling out her name, so that he would receive an image of her in his mind and know that it was her.

A-R-E/Y-O-U/D-E-A-D?

China was surprised by her grandfather's assumption, but she realised how spooky it must have been from his point of view. She tapped the table twice.

O-N-C-E/F-O-R/Y-E-S/T-W-I-C-E/F-O-R/N-O?

China responded to her grandfather's enquiry with one tap.

H-A-V-E/Y-O-U/F-O-U-N-D/M-A-D-D-O-X?

China answered the question with two taps. There was a pause for a moment before her grandfather continued.

C-A-N/Y-O-U/C-O-M-E/H-O-M-E?

It almost broke China's heart to answer the question as she tapped twice in response. She desperately wished to explain that she had become trapped in time, but didn't know quite how to express it. She spelled out the words *C-L-O-C-K* and *L-O-C-K*, in the hope that the images would somehow convey what she meant.

At least a minute passed by with no response. China waited with

baited breath, but there was still no reply. Then the planchette shot across the table with such force that everyone's hands slipped off. They stared silently as it whizzed about the letters on the table without any hands to guide it in erratic patterns with lightning speed.

"We've lost control," explained Dr Rickman. "Sometimes there is interference from the other side of the veil. When we make contact like this we are opening a portal and other souls sometimes wish to make their presence known. It's nothing to worry about, my dear; they have just temporarily broken the connection. I'm sure we will be able to connect with your grandfather once again."

The planchette eventually began to slow down to a pace that enabled the three bewildered sitters to read the messages being spelled out.

I / M-I-S-S / Y-O-U / E-R-I-C

Eric's eyes widened. Somehow, he seemed to know that his beloved, Maureen, was making contact with him.

China couldn't stop the jealousy from welling up inside her as she watched Eric's eyes begin to flood with tears. Aware that Eric was dead, his fiancée was taking part in a séance, looking for a sign that he was still around. Eric reassured Maureen that he was at peace before passing on his love to her. China was suddenly ashamed for feeling the way she did about Eric. It wasn't her place to come between a couple, even if the odds seemed to be stacked against them.

The planchette began to swirl about wildly by itself once again, gradually slowing down before coming to a halt in the centre of the table. All three of them watched as it began to spell out another message:

H-E-L-P / M-E / C-H-I-N-A

Both Eric and Dr Rickman were just as perplexed as China was.

"Is that you, Maddox?" China called out, almost on the edge of her seat with anticipation. She held her breath as she watched the planchette move in response to her question.

N-O/T-E-S-L-A

The planchette came to a standstill in the centre of the table. China stared at the upturned mug in disbelief. The message made absolutely no sense whatsoever. If it was the great Nikola Tesla himself, her idol, who had died long before China was born, it made no sense that he would ask for her help.

"How can I possibly help you?" China hollered, baffled at the idea of an esteemed inventor calling upon her for help. The planchette continued to move.

F-I-N-D/M-E

"But where are you?" China enquired, waiting patiently for his response, which came after a brief pause.

W-I-T-H/Y-O-U-R/B-R-O-T-H-E-R

China was becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of detail and demanded to be given more information.

"But where is my brother? Where can I find him? What do you need my help for? Why can't my brother make contact with me? Is he dead?"

China didn't draw a breath until the last question had spilled from her lips. The planchette began to swirl about in a chaotic manner and the table began to shake violently. Her rapid line of questioning had seemed to stir things up. A greyish-white mist began to materialise in the centre of the table above the Ouija board. There was no definite shape to the mist and just as it began

to fade, the empty wine bottle on the table fell over on its side, before beginning to spin erratically.

"God damn it! Will you answer me? Is my brother dead?" China began to yell with temper, her cheeks flushing as she stood up with her hands outstretched on the table. The bottle immediately came to a halt, its neck pointing towards the word 'No' before exploding into tiny fragments. The table was covered in tiny splinters of glass.

"You have received enough messages for one night, my dear," Dr Rickman soothed as he realised that the encounter was beginning to take its toll on China. "Time to call it a day," he added.

China was still awestruck by the night's events and was suddenly relieved to realise that her brother was still alive. She only wished that she could have received the message directly from her brother, but, nonetheless, she was still grateful.

As she glanced at the bits of broken bottle on the table, she acknowledged that it was a message of hope.



CHAPTER 10
TIME TO CALL IT A DAY



Before she had even opened her eyes, China knew that she was no longer lying on the cold hard floor of the bunker. She had no trouble falling asleep the night before, after her encounter with the Ouija board, and felt refreshed as she was beginning to rouse. It was the warmth upon her cheeks, the brightness of the morning light upon her closed eyelids and the sound of seagulls cawing above her head that quickly brought her to her senses. As her eyes shot open, China was stunned to see the picturesque blue haze of a summer sky stretching out overhead. Sitting up, she felt the sting of hot sand on the palms of her hands. Glancing down at her legs, she realised that her feet were wet from the waves spraying against her on the shore where she lay.

Dr Rickman was in a state of pure serenity as he casually strolled along the beach with the sleeves of his shirt rolled up and his waistcoat off. Eric was nowhere to be seen, much to China's horror. Apart from China and the doctor, there wasn't one other soul in sight. It seemed as if the two of them had been stranded alone together on a deserted island. As she rose to her feet, China began to take stock of her surroundings. The beach on which they had landed would have looked like any other beach in the world,

except for the unusual and slightly ugly-looking eyesores scattered along the shoreline. There were clusters of large structures, made of concrete and steel, which resembled spiky-looking, broken fences. The objects looked somehow familiar to China and yet she couldn't place where or when she had seen them before. China had started to make her way towards Dr Rickman when she was startled by the sound of heavy footsteps. The sound of the footsteps splashed down upon the glazed sand along the water's edge, as the waves criss-crossed back and forth, leaving a foamy froth behind. She turned around sharply and was instantly overjoyed at the sight of Eric running towards her. He was almost out of breath and clearly not as relaxed as the doctor.

"Germans!" shrieked Eric in a half whisper. "They're everywhere! We've got to get off the beach! We're like sitting ducks!" Eric just had the words out of his mouth when a hail of bullets pelted the water and sand as they fled.

It baffled Eric to wake up on a beach in the height of summer when they had fallen asleep the night before in a chilly trench during the depths of winter. Although he found it alarming, he had no time to give the situation much thought as he ran for his life. Not only had they become targets in such a wide-open space, but they were also unarmed. All they could do was flee and take shelter.

Having no idea where exactly they were or what to expect next, they scarpered towards the nearby sand dunes. Although they could still hear the deafening din of gunfire echoing all around them, something in the air was beginning to change. The sky seemed to dim dramatically, as if the sun had set at a rapid rate. The temperature remained unchanged and yet it still felt balmy, despite the darkness. Dr Rickman was the first to notice the full moon beaming its silky haze in a nocturnal sky. The stars had spilled across the heavens in sack-fulls, highlighting the rugged beauty of the coast.

While they were engrossed in the celestial marvels taking place above their heads, they had failed to spot a fleet of at least one

thousand battleships out at sea along the horizon, wheedling their way throughout the choppy waters.

"What in heaven's name is that?" gasped Dr Rickman, pointing upwards at what he could only guess were swarms of tiny insects covering the entire sky. There were black dots scattered in every direction. China gazed upwards as throngs of low-flying planes filled the airways, dropping men with parachutes like ants being spilled from a jar. It was a truly remarkable sight to behold.

"Paratroopers! ... There must be thousands of them," declared China, agog with the unbelievable spectacle she was witnessing.

Eric was equally fascinated, but keen to get both China and the doctor to safety.

"We're still far too exposed where we are," cautioned Eric. "We really need to get some proper shelter."

"Hedgehogs and Belgian Gates!" exclaimed China, much to the bewilderment of Eric and Dr Rickman.

"Would you care to elaborate on that statement?" responded Dr Rickman, bursting with curiosity.

"The beams and pillars along the beach; they're obstacles designed to damage the hulls of landing crafts and create difficulties for tanks. I've seen images similar to this along the coast of Normandy during the D-Day invasion of France in the Second World War," China informed Eric and the doctor. "That leads me to believe that we have landed in the summer of nineteen forty-four!" she added with astonishment.

"D-Day?" questioned Dr Rickman.

"I hate to break up the history lesson, but we really have to get a move on," urged Eric. Although it was a risky move, Eric suggested that they attempt to make their way towards the ruins of a farmhouse up ahead. Its glistening red roof was just visible in the moonlight, behind a clump of leafy trees at the foot of a hill. They would be exposed until they reached the woods beyond the beach, but given their circumstances, they had no other choice but to make a run for it.

The blare of machine-gun fire and artillery ripped through the

atmosphere, while thunderous blasts erupted from sea- and land-mines. The high-pitched drone of aircrafts saturating the night air was almost mind-shattering as they bolted like wild horses towards the hills. It was just as they got to the base of the hill when China was shot. She had stumbled over a rock, which lay hidden in the long grass, and had fallen to her knees. She picked herself back and continued to run. Eric looked back over his shoulder to check on her and came to a sudden stop when he realised how far behind she was. Oblivious to the bullets whizzing past his head, he ventured back to come to China's aid, when another bullet sliced through her chest. The outlandish thing about it was the fact that Eric could practically see right through China's torso. Incredibly, he had been able to observe the bullet darting towards her before it passed through her and penetrated the trunk of a tree close by. Eric was perplexed by what he had seen; the bullet should have severely if not fatally injured China and yet it zipped right through her as if she were transparent. The closer Eric drew to her, the more he began to doubt his eyes. He realised that she had become transparent, as if she were beginning to fade out of existence. What startled him even more was China's reaction to him as he stood in front of her.

"Eric, I can see right through you. You're beginning to fade away."

China was beginning to become alarmed. Looking down at her legs and stretching her arms out in front of her to examine her translucent hands, she quickly realised that it wasn't just Eric who was disappearing before her eyes.

"What's happening to us, Eric?" China cried out.

"Just keep running, China. That bullet was too much of a close call," Eric responded, leading the way forward towards the hill.

Dr Rickman was barely visible; his outline was the most solid-looking part of him as he blended into the rural scenery, like a camouflaged soldier merging into the trees. By the time they had reached the foot of the hill and frantically climbed over the stone wall to the front of the farmhouse, Dr Rickman was almost breath-

less. China's knee ached where she had fallen and so she sat down on the lumpy ground with her back against the wall. As she sat rubbing her knee, Eric lay flat out on the muddy cobbles, struggling to catch his breath. Although they were at a safe distance from danger, the clatter from the raging battle on the beach could still be heard loud and clear. Eric was astonished by what he was witnessing and bombarded China with questions about future warfare and weapons.

"Well, if you're impressed by that display, Lieutenant Applebee, wait until you hear all about World War Three!" China joked, sniggering at the thought of how shocked Eric would be at the future horrors of warfare. Her laughter stopped abruptly with the sudden earth-shattering roar of explosions ringing out into the atmosphere. Having searched the sky for the source of the racket, China could hardly believe what she was seeing. Eric and Dr Rickman of course had no idea what the objects were that loomed over the shoreline in the distance. China, of course, knew exactly what they were.

"I don't believe this." China almost whispered the words as she stared on in amazement. "War machines ... from World War Four! Caught up in a Second World War skirmish! This really is incredible!" she declared, the excitement of the unlikely event clearly fogging over the danger they faced.

Both Eric and Dr Rickman were mesmerised by the sight of the colossal metallic discs that hovered noiselessly above the coast in comparison to the hum of the aircraft from the Second World War. The only noise the war machines emitted was the hiss of deadly laser beams, blasting lethal doses of radiation, burning anything in its path. War machines, like drones, were unmanned crafts and were virtually indestructible. As they watched the battle infolding before them, it was difficult to decipher who was fighting whom. The war machines truly were formidable forces of destruction and the most alarming part of it all was that they seemed to hold no loyalty towards either side of the current conflict. The killer crafts aimed their lethal laser

beams in every possible direction, torching the earth, sea and land below them.

The more paratroopers they massacred, the more of them seemed to reappear like weeds, which, despite being killed off, continued to sprout up elsewhere. Allied aircrafts, warships and tanks were burned to cinders, as were countless German infantry and tanks. The sudden and unexpected arrival of fleets of ancient battleships, similar to those of the Spanish Armada of 1588, added to the bedlam that unfolded. For absolutely no reason, thousands upon thousands of armoured, medieval knights on horseback galloped out of the ether, further adding to the already chaotic situation. But the brave knights were no match for the sophisticated futuristic warfare and fell with their horses in their hundreds. The beach was strewn with the corpses of both men and horses, which seemed to evaporate in places, due to the mighty strength of the radiation from the lasers, burning craters right into the crust of the earth.

"Hell could not possibly be as bleak as this," remarked Dr Rickman, clearly moved by the harrowing vision of death and destruction playing out before him.

"We seem to have fallen into a world of perpetual war, where time doesn't follow any rules. It would seem that there are no clear sides to this war. Both man and machine appear to be fighting for the sake of fighting," China commented as if she were almost in a trance, observing the madness that surrounded them.

"It's every man for himself," Eric added, his face wincing with the ear-piercing boom of combat unfurling throughout the great vault of the heavens above their heads.

"We would be a great deal safer if we took refuge in the farmhouse," Eric suggested as he nodded towards the tattered remains of a small cottage built of beige and rusty-coloured bricks. The farmhouse had seen better days, as the walls appeared to be cracked and crumbling in places.

"I can almost see right through you now, Eric," China stated, half-concerned, yet half-amused by the novelty of it. As they

approached the barn, China was even more fascinated to discover that its outer wall was also beginning to become transparent. As they stood next to the wall, they could see right through it into the kitchen. A young woman and a small child of five or six years sat huddled on a bench by a long, rectangular, wooden table, completely oblivious to the fact that they were being observed from the other side of the wall. The woman was dressed in vintage-style clothing, which dated back to the 1940s, and wore her hair in an 'old Hollywood' fashion. It was China's guess that she was a civilian hiding out during the Second World War.

China was the first to attempt the unimaginable as she placed the palms of her hands against the outer bricks of the wall and cautiously pushed her way right through. When she was satisfied that it was possible to pass all the way, she plucked up the courage to walk right through the wall to the other side. Eric quickly followed her lead, leaving Dr Rickman standing outside in a state of complete astonishment. The doctor was even more amused at the sight of the woman knocking her chair over as she rose to her feet, screaming as she grabbed a firm hold of her son's arm. The two startled civilians fled through the front door from the ghostly apparitions, which had seemingly walked through a solid wall. Dr Rickman was almost doubled over from laughter as he watched her scarper out into the woods, yelling as she ran.

It was beginning to become obvious that time wasn't at all as it seemed and couldn't be taken for granted at any given moment. China had deduced that they seemed to be sliding in and out of different time slips, having absolutely no control over their own destiny. Eric had commented on how difficult, if not impossible, it would be to find China's brother if they couldn't take control of their own fate by choosing a time and a place in which to be present. These were not the words that China had wished to hear and yet she knew deep down that Eric was making a valid point. Despite all the obstacles, China always liked to remain positive. She was aware that she could fall asleep at any time and wake up one hundred years earlier, but she still somehow had faith in her

destiny. She had always hoped that determination alone was enough to guide her in the right direction and truly believed that the universe worked in the most mysterious of ways to provide solutions for all problems. All she had to do was bide her time and wait for her luck to come in. Time may not always have been on her side, but she was certain that luck was. All she needed was for the universe to provide her with the smallest hint of her brother's whereabouts.

Her next plan of action was to participate in a séance to contact her brother. Dr Rickman was only too willing to oblige China and hosted the proceedings. They began the séance by pulling three chairs close together, where they sat and joined hands to form a circle. Dr Rickman called out for anyone who might have been present to make themselves known. They waited in silence for a moment before he called out for a second time. Again, there was silence. On the third attempt to make contact, the doctor called out to Maddox Winter to make his presence known. The lack of materials for constructing a Ouija board meant that the doctor had to resort to asking questions and receiving a series of knocks in answer. He had indicated that one knock would represent the answer 'no' while two knocks would represent 'yes'. Seconds after the doctor had called out for Maddox, the knocking began. It was faint at first, but grew gradually louder and louder. The result was a constant stream of knocks with no pause in between to allow the doctor to ask any questions. The knocking seemed to come from everywhere at once: the table, the walls and the roof. It became violent in nature and so loud that they felt compelled to break the circle by letting go of each other's hands.

"This is a very negative response," Dr Rickman warned China. "It wouldn't be wise to continue."

Although she was disappointed that she couldn't receive a message from her brother, China was no longer comfortable with continuing the séance.

"All I want is to know that Maddox is still alive and content wherever he is. Why won't he make contact with me?" China

pleaded as if she thought it possible that Maddox could actually hear her words. Her self-pity was rudely interrupted by the violent shaking of the chair upon which she was sitting. The chair vibrated and shook so hard that she slid off it and landed on the floor with a thud. The chair instantly levitated at least four feet in the air, before smashing itself off a wall with ferocious force. Both Dr Rickman and Eric were speechless by what they had witnessed and stared at the bits of broken debris scattered on the floor by the wall. Eric thought it best to distract China from the menacing incident by occupying her mind with other matters. He had asked China to root through the pantry and larders in search of any form of provisions they could survive on, while he and Dr Rickman searched the yard for firewood so they could settle down for the night.

It was a long, hard night as they struggled to sleep through the earth-shattering noise of warfare being unleashed upon their corner of the globe. China had a large bed all to herself with a small fire lit in the fireplace across the room. Eric and Dr Rickman slept on the floor, with ragged old blankets thrown across them for warmth. The unexplainable case of fading in and out of existence seemed to have worn off by the next morning, as their appearance once more became solid and robust. A new dilemma was to trouble them as they woke the next morning. Although it was in fact morning time, the reality was that the sun never actually rose. The moon stubbornly held on tight to its position in the starry arch above their heads. It was the most extraordinary occurrence, to wake up after a full night's sleep and discover that the daylight had never materialised.

Peering out of the bedroom window, China could see the gleaming moon trapped in the depths of darkness, a prisoner of time. Its radiant light spilled across the moody clouds, attempting to escape. Beneath the brilliance of the moonlight, the war still raged on, oblivious to the beauty of the shadowy night. Several days rolled by, but the sun never rose to chase the darkness away. Time had somehow become frozen, giving rise to an eternal night,

as scenes from the warzone replayed themselves over and over again. It wasn't safe to venture out in search of food and so they eked out an existence with the little provisions they had found in the abandoned farmhouse.

On what should have been the fifth day since they had taken refuge, if time flowed in a normal fashion, the war machines simply ceased to be. Eric had been observing them over a number of days from a hole in the roof of the farmhouse and had noted that they had begun to fade gradually day by day. China had reasoned that they had perhaps disappeared from the atmosphere and reappeared back in their own timeline during World War Four. She further suggested that it was probably just as likely that they too would simply vanish into the ether someday and re-emerge in their correct timelines. Eric didn't like to dwell upon the idea that China might one day travel back to her own timeline. Knowing that he would more than likely never see his fiancée again, he had grown quite an attachment to China. It would have been devastating for him to have lost the only two women he had ever loved.



LEAVING China behind with Dr Rickman in the farmhouse, while going out in search of food, wasn't an easy decision for Eric to make, but there was no other choice. Stealing out into the dead of night, with the moon tucked away behind thick clouds and the sound of artillery fire in the distance, was quite an eerie experience. Eric made his way to the top of the hill behind the farmhouse by crawling through the long grass to avoid being spotted by the enemy. From the top of the hill, he had an excellent vantage point of the quaint-looking village beyond. Eric cautiously meandered through bushes and trees to get to the nearest building at the edge of the village. The lack of activity, the war-torn shells of buildings and the rubble piled up on the streets made it obvious that it was a ghost village. The Germans had obviously laid siege upon the village and had long since gone.

After finding slim pickings in the first two derelict cottages he had come across, Eric searched the cellar of a deserted tavern and found a generous amount of tinned goods, dried meat and fruit, cheese and several bottles of wine. He filled his duffle bag with as much as it could hold and helped himself to a rifle and several cartridges of bullets, which he had found in a closet upstairs on the way out. He was more than pleased with his loot and looked forward to a pleasant meal upon his return to the farmhouse.

When he arrived back to the safety of the farmyard, Eric stalled to look in the kitchen window. He was beside himself with shock to see a man he didn't recognise standing over China as she sat at the kitchen table. Dr Rickman was also sitting at the table. Eric's adrenalin went into overdrive as he darted towards the front door, bursting into the kitchen, with his newly acquired rifle cocked and aimed at the stranger. Dr Rickman instantly rose to his feet and implored Eric not to shoot.

"It's quite all right, Lieutenant Applebee; there's no need to shoot. We're not under any threat from this man. He's just a messenger," the doctor declared with his usual air of composure.

Eric held his firearm in position and stared coldly at the man standing before him, ready to pull the trigger at any given moment.

"Dr Rickman's right," China added. "You can put your rifle away. He brought us a message. Look, Eric."

China held out a tattered-looking postcard for Eric to see.

"Why don't you listen to the lady and put your rifle away," commented the stranger. "You don't want to literally shoot the messenger!" The man snorted as he laughed, which seemed to oddly reassure Eric that he was in fact no threat.

Eric lowered his rifle, but stood fixed to the spot awaiting further explanation, taking a good long look at the man standing before him. The messenger was well over six-foot tall, had a wide, stocky build, a neatly maintained, dark brown beard to match the colour of his hair and wore a long, grey, hooded robe.

"Take a look at this postcard," China insisted as she placed it

directly into Eric's hands, breaking his protective stance. Eric sat down at the table and read the postcard out loud.

News of your brother.

The only other word that was clearly visible was the signature at the end - "Jodie." The rest of the words were so badly smudged that they were completely illegible. It looked as if the postcard had got wet and the ink had run. Even the postmark had been tarnished so that only the date was legible:

May 18th 1942

Although China was grateful to receive any word at all of her brother, she was deeply disheartened and frustrated by the lack of detail contained in the message.

"I don't understand how it took two years to deliver a postcard," China snapped at the messenger. "And as for the condition it's in ..."

The messenger straightened himself up where he stood, ready to defend himself.

"Two years? I'll have you know that the postcard was only posted two days ago. The sender is obviously in a different timeline from you." The high pitch of his voice dropped as he continued. "You must realise how incredibly difficult, and at times almost impossible, it is to slip back and forth through time delivering messages. For a start, I'm one of the very few people willing to put their neck on the line, breaking all the rules for very little thanks. If the War Office were to find out—"

"The War Office!?" exclaimed China. "What do you know of the War Office?" China's eyes narrowed with curiosity as she paused to let the messenger answer.

"I formerly worked for the War Office, but have long since deserted my post. I could not condone all that I had witnessed and turned my back on one of the most powerful organisations in

history. If I am found, I will most certainly be executed. You have no idea of the risk involved in what I do."

The messenger sat down at the table beside Dr Rickman, took out a cigarette and began to smoke. China was dumbfounded for a moment and gazed silently at the man, watching him smoke, before she once again found her tongue.

"Does the War Office actually realise how appalling and horrific conditions are for the soldiers? Do they know that there are major glitches in time, that people are becoming trapped?" China paused to catch her breath, hanging on the messenger's next word. She didn't expect that he would laugh wildly before he answered her.

"It's the War Office we're talking about." The messenger closed his eyes tightly as he continued to laugh. "Of course they know what's going on. Who do you think orchestrated the entire war? Why they did of course. They set up the whole damn show."

Dr Rickman didn't take a liking to the messenger's conduct in front of a lady and pursed his lips together, frowning deeply at the man while he searched Eric's face for a reaction. Eric was more curious than aggravated by the man and was keen to know more about the War Office, which he correctly assumed didn't have the same meaning as it did during his time.

China locked eyes with the messenger before she spoke; her tone was gentle and earnest. "Perhaps, if I reply to this message, you might be so kind as to deliver it for me? I wish to enquire about my brother's whereabouts. It's a matter of urgency."

"I take it your brother's lost then? Aren't we all!" the messenger insensitively stated.

Dr Rickman immediately rose to his feet, his eyes boring into the messenger's face as he pulled on the last drag of his cigarette and tossed it down to the floor, standing on it to stub it out. The stench of tobacco loitered like an unwelcome intruder, wafting with the messenger's movements. Eric also stood up and placed a hand upon the doctor's shoulder to diffuse the tension, coaxing

him to take his seat once more. The messenger proceeded to rain on China's parade.

"As for replying to that postcard, I couldn't possibly deliver it unless you know the address and what year it is. Otherwise I can't help you out I'm afraid."

China was beginning to lose heart for the first time and buried her head in her hands upon the kitchen table. Dr Rickman did his best to soothe her by softly stroking her shoulders.

"Can't you at least make some enquiries?" suggested Eric, holding the messenger's gaze as he nodded his head in China's direction. It had only just begun to dawn on the messenger that China was becoming somewhat distraught and was in need of a ray of hope. Having agreed to be on the lookout for any clues to her brother's disappearance, the messenger took a detailed description of what Maddox looked like before he disappeared and examined an old photo of him. China felt that it was important to mention what the fortune teller had told her about Maddox, that he was still alive and had been 'taken'.

"You must have worked out by now that if your brother was taken, it's the War Office who was behind his abduction. The White Knights." The messenger spoke in a matter of fact manner.

China's gaze tightened in on the man as he spoke; her delicate mouth hung partially open as she anticipated further clarification.

"All War Office personnel wear a distinct, white, military uniform: white shirts, white tunics, white trousers, white trilbies, belts and trimmings; everything is pristine white."

The messenger reached for another cigarette from his pack on the table and puckered his lips together to hold the cigarette in position as he struck a match to light it. He continued to speak only after he had inhaled his first drag.

"Most people refer to them as the White Knights, although some people like to call them the White Coats, which adds a whole new meaning to the phrase 'men in white coats'! If the men in white coats ever do come looking for you, remember that they are the real lunatics who are running the asylum! They are a law

unto themselves, orchestrated through sheer corruption and motivated by material gain.”

The messenger went on to give numerous accounts of abductions that he had witnessed throughout history. Sometimes the White Knights themselves would make an appearance, while some abductions were carried out by newly recruited soldiers from various periods of history. New recruits were encouraged to obey orders under the influence of torture and brainwashing. All victims who were abducted were drafted into an army without any consent. The War Office doesn't have any regard for which army new recruits join up with or even which historical conflict they fight for, as long as they are engaged in the act of war itself.”

Eric felt sick to his stomach to think that the main objective of the War Office was to promote war and prosper from the slaughter.

“As for those who refuse to fight,” the messenger added with a sombre tone, “the consequences are quite gruesome and unpleasant.”

China stared hard at a knot in the wood on the table top as her imagination led her into the darkest corners of her mind, thinking of her brother's fate and imagining the worst. Although the messenger had vowed to make enquires about China's brother, he couldn't promise that it would lead to anything.

When the messenger had stubbed out his second cigarette, he reached into his mailbag and pulled out a precious-looking timepiece. It was a golden pocket watch with tiny diamond gears visibly rotating inside, as two silver hands ticked within its framework. Placing the timepiece in the palm of China's hands, the messenger informed her that should she ever require his services again, all she had to do was wind the watch back by one hour. The messenger had pledged that by the time the hour had passed, he would be there by her side, ready for service. He also added that he would make contact with her if he had any news of her brother.

Just before the messenger made his leave, Eric began to quiz him about the never-ending darkness in which they had dwelled

for the past several days. The messenger informed them that they had somehow slipped into a time warp, where time repeats itself over and over again in a loop. He advised them of the dangers of dwelling within a time warp for too long and suggested that they soon relocate elsewhere to distance themselves from the phenomenon. His explanation of how space, time and gravity were all intricately linked completely washed over Dr Rickman's head. although he was a man of science, there was a vast amount of future technology and discoveries that the doctor considered to be the result of witchcraft or black magic. The messenger explained the fact that travelling further afield would distance them from the time warp, releasing them from its grip.

Eric was less interested in how they would escape the time warp and more intrigued about what would eventually happen if they were to remain where they were. The messenger warned them that time warps had the potential to freeze, meaning that eventually time would come to a complete standstill. Every living organism would become frozen in time, while equipment and machinery would come to a grinding halt. Human souls would essentially become trapped in a state of suspended animation. The messenger himself had experienced the phenomenon first-hand when he entered a time warp in 1969 during the Vietnam War. Time had looped over upon itself, replaying the same day over and over again. Then the unimaginable occurred and time itself came to a complete standstill. People simply froze in various positions. Some were in the process of running or walking, while others were sitting or standing. Those who were running or walking at the time had somehow become mysteriously balanced on one foot as they leaned slightly forward to take their next step. The most sinister of positions that the messenger had witnessed were those who became frozen as they fell in combat. Soldiers and civilians alike seemed to float in mid-air in a perpetual state of falling, just at the very moment that they had been injured. Casualties lay in field hospitals in a never-ending state of suffering as the blood that flowed from their wounds appeared to have frozen in time.

Doctors and nurses stood over their patients like mannequins, silently staring ahead, unable to move an inch. Some people's mouths were wide open, time stopping just as they spoke, while others had their mouths shut tightly as they listened. A small number of people became frozen in mid-yawn. The diverse mix of both disgusting and wonderful smells and aromas hung in the air, depending on where they lingered, just as time had stopped. Birds and butterflies came to a standstill where they flew, hovering unnaturally, their wings unable to flap. The most amazing sights of all were those of perpetual combat: bullets and missiles levitating abnormally in mid-flight; war planes and helicopters hanging quietly and eerily in the sky. The bullets, blades and machetes seemed to be permanently wedged in their victim's bodies. Freshly wounded casualties were trapped in an everlasting and unbearable moment of suffering, just before the blood began to seep from their wounds.

The messenger was the only soul who was free to move through the motionless scene as he was the only one who wasn't physically present in the moment. He was merely an astral projection, visiting the dimension, but not quite part of it.

"A time freeze can last hours, days or decades. It wouldn't be the most pleasant of experiences to come by. They say that those who have befallen such a fate are mentally aware that they have become statues in a stationary world. The very moment that time stops, they feel, hear, see, taste, smell and think the same thing over and over and over again. It is the least pleasant of experiences of course for those who are on the brink of death, destined to suffer ceaseless, never-ending agony." The messenger felt that he had said enough about the matter and gathered his cigarettes and lighter from the kitchen table, before he stood up to leave.

"Where should we go to escape the time warp?" quizzed Eric, eager to make a swift getaway.

"Absolutely anywhere," the messenger answered. "You can decide what direction you want to go, but the further away from here you travel, the better chance you have of shaking it off.

There's a train station not far from here in the next town. I happen to be heading that way myself. I could give you all a lift in the back of my mail truck. I can't promise that it will be comfortable, but I will get you there safely."

Both Eric and Dr Rickman agreed that it was the best option they had and began to gather up provisions for the journey. China was a little distressed at the thought of relocating to another time and place, for fear that she wouldn't be able to receive any further communication from Jodie. The postcard had come as an unexpected beacon of hope and now she was leaving the very place and time in which she had received it. If she was going to find her brother, she was certain that Jodie could help her.

The night air was warm and balmy as they followed the messenger's lead, leaving the rustic farmhouse behind them. He had parked his truck about a half a mile down the road, which was little more than a dirt track. It was a 1940s mail wagon, hidden behind a clump of trees at the entrance to a field full of sheep. It was obvious to China that the messenger chose particular forms of transport to fit into a specific time period and avoid drawing attention to himself.

The walk to the mail wagon was a welcome distraction from the dark clouds that loomed over China's mind. The novelty of time travel had certainly worn off. Sitting on the floor of the wagon, hunched up against sacks of mail and parcels, she longed to return to her own world, a safe haven where time was stable and flowed in one direction only. She felt as if she was suffering from some form of bizarre jetlag from which she could see no end.

The journey to the train station was an uneventful one, except for the German checkpoint on the outskirts of town. Everyone remained silent except for the messenger who happened to be fluent in German. He brandished a perfect set of documents and paperwork, much to the satisfaction of the SS Officer who had stopped him. China was the only one who felt genuine terror in her gut as they approached the checkpoint and was almost overcome with relief when they received the nod of approval to

proceed. Both Eric and Dr Rickman were blessed with blissful unawareness of the horror behind the uniform of a Nazi soldier.

Having reached the train station, the messenger had brought them as far as he was willing to go, for fear of being discovered by the War Office.

"This is the end of the road for me, I'm afraid," the messenger stated as he helped everyone down from the back of the wagon.

Dr Rickman had warmed ever so slightly to the man and thanked him for the lift while Eric shook his hand.

"Remember to use the timepiece if you need to call on me for a favour." The messenger spoke directly to China, while lighting up a cigarette for the onward journey. The smell of sulphur from the burnt match was a comforting smell to her, reminding her of cosy nights she spent by the fireside at home, reading books by candlelight on stormy nights during power cuts. China thanked the man and joined Eric and Dr Rickman by the platform. They were counting out the French currency they had found in a tin box under the mattress of China's bed at the farmhouse. There was enough money to purchase three tickets and still have a nice tidy sum left over. The train took on an ethereal form, hidden in a veil of mist, as the steam continuously poured upwards into the atmosphere, disappearing into the darkness. They boarded with the little amount of luggage they had and took their seats in the first-class carriage at the front of the train. It was a welcome relief to escape the confinement of the rundown ramshackle of a farmhouse, as well as the monotonous grip of a time warp.

Dr Rickman had commented that it would be a pleasure to leave the never-ending hours of darkness far behind them and finally call it a day.



CHAPTER II
SILENCE IS GOLDEN



Maddox's mouth opened widely as he gasped for breath. His head plunged back under the water, prompting him to hold his breath once again. His eyes stung when he opened them as he finally rose to the surface of the water. His youthful body, which was muscular and bronzed from the sun, glistened like crystal as the water dripped down his manly frame. He was swimming in the sea on one of the hottest days of the summer. The shrill sounds of children's laughter as they frolicked on the beach and the humid salty air that held the seagulls as they glided in the heavens made China feel at peace with her surroundings. She couldn't believe her luck that she had found her long-lost brother after so much time had passed. However, she became alarmed when the sky suddenly became dark and it began to feel bone-chillingly cold. She was standing waist-deep in the water with the foam of the waves cresting against her torso. As she reached out a hand to her brother, the waves grew higher and engulfed them both. Maddox reached out his hand, but was pulled back by the riptide, becoming entangled in the seaweed. He didn't seem to panic, but instead stared coldly and blankly at China as he was pulled away from her. She was completely submerged by the water and began

to panic for her own safety. The last thing she saw in her mind's eye before she woke up was a stark, red flag blowing in the breeze, emblazoned with the bold print of a swastika.

China had been asleep for well over an hour before being jolted awake as the train came to a rather abrupt stop. The thick clouds of steam and the darkness of the night made it difficult for them to work out where they had stopped. They sat back comfortably in their leather seats, watching passengers dashing by, some boarding the train and others disembarking. There were people of all shapes and sizes, all dressed in the fashions of the 1940s. The carriage began to rock gently from side to side as it pulled away from the platform to continue its journey. China began to feel as if she were being lulled back to sleep with the swaying motion of the train, but sharply sat up straight, forcing herself to stay awake.

The journey to their final destination was to be long and tiresome. They hadn't fretted about watching the stops along the way, as they had planned to disembark at the train's last stop. It was relaxing to watch the trees and fields whirl by, joined occasionally by the rooftops of houses, churches and other buildings. Eric was snoring loudly with his head slumped uncomfortably on Dr Rickman's shoulder. Every so often, his snoring began to peak, much to the irritation of the doctor, who was doing his best to read a book that he carried in his medical bag. A gentle poke in the ribcage every now and then from the doctor seemed to hush the racket for a while, before it slowly built back up again into a crescendo.

China was curious about the doctor's book and tilted her head awkwardly to the side to cop a peek at the title:

THE LANCET MEDICAL JOURNAL, 1885

She chuckled to herself as soon as she realised that the medical journal had been hundreds of years out of date during her lifetime.

Many hours had passed and yet the sun refused to rise. They were obviously no further away from the grip of the time warp and China began to wonder if they would ever see daylight again. By

now the doctor had also joined Eric in a dreamy slumber, leaving her at a loss for company as she sat listening to them both snoring loudly. Just as the train pulled into the next station, China strained her neck to look out of the window behind her and waited for the steam to clear a little from the tracks, so she could see the name of the station and figure out where they were. She could just about make out the sign – *Lehrter Stadtbahnhof* – and was a little alarmed that they were now in Berlin, the German capital, during the height of World War II. It was daunting to see Nazi uniforms up and down the platform, interspersed with civilians, checking their papers and shouting profanities at some, whom they chose to rough up. She watched helplessly as two German soldiers pushed and slapped a middle-aged man around. He was smartly dressed, wearing a tweed suit and matching hat, with the yellow Star of David pinned to his outer coat. It was a distressing scene to watch, but she couldn't peel her eyes away from the man, wondering if he had a wife and children waiting at home for him. She imagined that he would never see his family again, which led her to mull over her own circumstances, pondering the fact that she might not live to see her grandfather or brother ever again. Her despondent thoughts were short lived and she sat up straight with great alarm as she peered out the window. She was straining to see if her eyes were deceiving her and let out a yelp, which immediately woke Eric and Dr Rickman. Eric had been in a deep sleep and was startled even more so than the doctor by the urgency of China's cry.

"What did you see? Nazis?" enquired Eric, as he sat up hastily with concern.

"Worse than that," China anxiously replied in a hushed tone. "White Knights. There were at least two of them. They were carrying luggage, which they had just taken with them as they got off the train."

Eric was on high alert and instantly began to scan the carriage for more of them. He wasn't exactly sure how he would handle the situation should they come across more of them on the train, but he was sure as hell ready to put up a good fight.

"Did you see where they went, China?" Dr Rickman asked as he put his medical journal back into his bag.

"No," she replied. "At least they're no longer on the train with us. I really hope we don't encounter any more of them." China looked about the carriage nervously as she spoke. Eric and Dr Rickman were now both wide awake and had no intention of dropping their guard for the rest of the journey.

It had become difficult to relax for the rest of their trek, as every other passenger in their carriage was beginning to look a little suspicious to them. An attractive-looking, brunette lady with bright red lipstick and fine, vintage clothes cut to fit her perfect figure stared intensely at Dr Rickman. Her constant staring didn't seem to bother the doctor and China correctly guessed that he was enjoying the view he had for himself. Eric was wary of the woman's unwarranted attention towards the doctor. China, however, suggested that the woman was intrigued by Dr Rickman's Victorian appearance and dated clothing, which made him stand out under the present circumstances. Eric grew slightly more paranoid at each new stop. He sat forward on the edge of his seat as he scrutinised every move the passengers made, watching them pass up and down the aisle, through the carriage.

As they pulled out of Frankfurt Station, their fate had taken an unexpected turn for the worse. What initially heightened their sense of panic was the teeth-shattering screech of the train's brakes, resulting in passengers being flung out of their seats and luggage strewn about the carriage. The scene was the equivalent of a doll's house being turned upside down. The screech of the brakes was quickly followed by the sound of people's screams and groans, which in turn was drowned out by an enormous explosion. The blast rocked right through the entire length of the train as the carriage windows smashed to smithereens. The first-class carriage, although it had been derailed from the crash, was the only carriage that was still standing upright. The rest of the carriages down the line hadn't only become derailed but had completely overturned on their sides. Passengers from the overturned carriages were crying

out for help, as they were trapped in the twisted metal frame of the carriage panels, which had become contorted, making prisoners of them. Shards of splintered glass and other debris littered the floor of the first-class carriage, where Dr Rickman hunkered down on his knees to lift China up onto her feet. She had small grazes on her right cheek and temple and she felt as if she had sprained her wrist, but otherwise she was unharmed. Eric had received quite a wallop to his head as a passenger's briefcase had landed upon him with a thud, knocking him to the floor. Eric lifted himself up off the floor as Dr Rickman tended to China's cuts.

From the inside of the carriage, the cause of the crash wasn't apparent.

Eric immediately kicked into action, helping other passengers to their feet. He began to crawl through the wreckage of what remained of the other carriages, to search for survivors. When he had pulled the first survivor out from under a chunk of corrugated iron and dragged the body out into the open air, he suddenly realised that a huge warship had somehow crashed directly into the train. It was difficult for Eric's mind to accept what he was seeing. It made no sense that a naval ship should have suddenly moored on top of a railway line, hundreds of miles from the sea.

Dr Rickman was flabbergasted by the sight, as were a great many passengers who had survived the train wreck. The doctor was speechless and stood quietly for a moment as he witnessed the impossible.

China was less surprised by the incident. She had begun to grow accustomed to the bizarre nature of her new environment and was beginning to believe that anything was possible. The name of the ship was the *USS Eldridge*. China was aware that it was a warship dating from the Second World War. It was the infamous ship that had completely vanished from its port in Philadelphia during a time travel experiment in 1943 that went completely wrong. During the experiment, the ship had disappeared, but when it had re-materialised in its proper time and location, most

of its crew had been horrifically mutilated. Men had become embedded in the steel frame of the ship, their bodies twisted and contorted as they had somehow merged into solid metal and wooden objects. Many died, but those who survived the ordeal went insane. Staring at the unbelievable scene in front of her brought dark memories to the surface of China's mind. She immediately recalled the gruesome discovery of the man who had become embedded in the wall, the night she first met Jack, and the soldiers who had become entwined on the battlefield in No Man's Land.

Eric, along with several other men, continued to hunt for more survivors, pulling out bodies, dead and alive, laying them down in the fields either side of the railway line. Both Dr Rickman and China began treating as many passengers as they possibly could and were assisted by another doctor and two nuns, who were also passengers. The warship had received a considerable blow to her portside where the train had cleaved a gaping hole in its metal frame. There were few survivors of the train wreckage compared with the mounting toll of dead passengers. It was a harrowing task for China to check bodies lined up either side of the tracks for vital signs. Those who were blessed to have survived the ordeal were too busy tending to those in need to have noticed the activity on board the ship. It was China who drew Dr Rickman's attention to the men who were streaming out onto the deck. At first glance, they looked smart in what appeared to be crisp, white, naval uniforms. On closer inspection, the men were not dressed in naval uniforms at all, but were flawlessly kitted out in the uniforms of the War Office.

"White Knights, Dr Rickman. We've got to get out of here." China began to run in Eric's direction as she spoke. Dr Rickman finished bandaging a man's arm, which had been gashed by shards of glass as he fell over. Eric followed China's gaze as she pointed out the enemy to him. Just as Eric looked up at the ship, a large group of White Knights had gathered together, peering over the hull at the train wreckage below. One of the White Knights was

scanning the area with his binoculars and seemed to come to a standstill as he looked in China's direction. He quickly handed over his binoculars to his colleague and pointed towards China.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Eric gasped as he grabbed a tight hold of China by the arm and ran as fast as his legs would take him in the direction of the dense forest, beyond the train tracks. China was panting, trying her best to keep up with Eric as he dragged her along the dewy grass. Dr Rickman abandoned the rest of the casualties in quick pursuit of Eric and China, who were both almost breathless from running so hard.

Once all three of them had cleared the cluster of tall pine trees at the edge of the forest, the atmosphere felt even more foreboding. The elongated branches that extended out into the night sky formed a dome above the forest. Although it sheltered them from sight, it blocked out the silvery slivers of moonlight, creating a cavern of inky darkness. They hastily meandered through the thick growth of thorny bushes and sinewy trees, which seemed to continuously criss-cross in front of their path, no matter what direction they chose to go. The blackness within the depths of the forest, the chilling howl of wolves calling out to the moon, the stench of dead animals and the various other intimidating sounds of nature led them to the conclusion that they had entered a sinister labyrinth, which reeked of danger. The further they strayed into the bowels of the forest, the more ominous the mood became. Heavy layers of fog draped across the land, giving the impression that ghostly mists were rising like steam from the soft, mossy earth beneath them. The snap of twigs and crunch of leaves beneath their feet warned the animals of their presence, as they ventured onwards.

When they were all in agreement that they had covered enough ground to become sufficiently hidden from the enemy, they took a moment to catch their breath and gather their thoughts. Eric had proposed that it wouldn't be so wise to proceed much further into the forest, for fear of becoming lost. Being lost in time was one problem, but being geographically lost would only

further add to the hopelessness of their dilemma. They knew it wasn't feasible to remain in the forest for a prolonged period of time. Not only would they quickly run out of food, but the wildlife posed a threat of its own. Any plan they tried to collectively forge seemed entirely impractical. China took out her grandfather's compass and opened its case to look at the needle. She wasn't really sure why she took it out, as it was of no benefit to them to know which direction was north. Dr Rickman stood close to China as he glanced over her shoulder at the compass. He was knocked for six to see that the needle was spinning wildly back and forth, clockwise and anti-clockwise.

Their moment's rest had ended abruptly as they could hear voices whispering and boughs breaking, forewarning them that they were being tracked down and hunted. The adrenalin began to pump through their veins as they scarpered on further into the forest. As they picked up their pace, they frantically dodged branches, tree stumps and rocks. No matter how fast they ran, the voices seemed to be close on their heels. Gunshots rang out, echoing throughout the trees, helping to boost their speed. Eric was leading the way through nature's obstacle course, when he suddenly glanced behind him and realised that he was on his own. He stopped instantly and retraced his steps. He could barely believe his eyes as he watched Dr Rickman lift China's limp body from the forest floor. He sprinted back towards her, not caring whether he lived or died himself. His hands trembled as he reached out to touch her rosy cheeks. Her eyes remained tightly shut. Dr Rickman's clothing was soaked in China's blood as he carried her in his arms like a tiny child. Eric's eyes filled with tears, which rolled down his cheeks uncontrollably.

Their pace had slackened as they continued to flee the enemy. They seemed to have progressed for quite some time without any further gunshots being fired in their direction. The sound of the voices and the thud of footsteps could no longer be heard. It was only when they realised that a thick blanket of snow began to crunch beneath their feet that they felt they were no longer being

pursued. The chilly bite in the air and the fact that Dr Rickman could see the vapour of his breath rising before his face prompted him to stop. He kneeled in the snow and laid China out so that he could examine her wound. The bullet had pierced her left lung and had become lodged inside her. He searched his bag until he found suitable bandages and linen strips so that he could attempt to stem the flow of blood. It was an insufficient number of bandages to work with and so he tore off strips of material from her skirt to suffice. It wasn't the most ideal of dressings, but it was all he had to work with for the moment. He took off his cloak and gently wrapped it around her fragile form. Her breathing was shallow and raspy. Eric's tears splashed as they landed on China's cheeks.

"Will she be OK, Doctor?" Eric enquired, as he wiped his face with both hands. He knew before Dr Rickman even answered him that the outlook for China was pretty grim.

"It all depends ..." Dr Rickman's tone was low and grave as he spoke. "It all depends on whether I can successfully remove the bullet from her lung, but I shall not lie to you, Eric, it's not looking good."

The snow underneath China's body had become heavily stained from her blood. The dark red pool seemed to expand as it soaked through the snow. The red hue of her blood was a stark contrast to the silvery white snow, which enveloped the ground around her. China's complexion grew paler and was highlighted by the rays of the moon, shining down through the branches of the trees. As if Eric and Dr Rickman hadn't enough of a burden to struggle with, it began to snow heavily. The snowflakes were large and thick as they fell, making it almost impossible to see a foot in front of them. Dr Rickman had stumbled a number of times, as he tried to make his way forwards. They would need to find some form of shelter for the night and attempt to remove the bullet from China's lung. Dr Rickman began to contemplate how difficult it would be to bury her body in the middle of the forest during a snow storm, while Eric was wallowing in self-pity at the thought of losing another love, for the second time in his life.

They trekked slowly onwards, doubtful of each step they took. Their circumstances became even drearier as a bitter wind pelted their faces with large snowflakes. This was it, this was the end; they could go no further.

Dr Rickman flopped down onto his knees and placed China upon the snow. Looking up at Eric, he shook his head as he checked China for a pulse.

"This is it, I'm afraid ... It's time to say goodbye to her." Dr Rickman smiled tenderly at China and stroked her cheek as he cradled her in his arms. Eric fell to his knees, whimpering and sobbing hysterically. China's complexion was pale and waxy looking, as her breathing was beginning to deteriorate. Her hair turned white as the snowflakes began to settle, which blended in with her pale face. Eric buried his head upon her chest and continued to sob, oblivious to the bone-chilling coldness of his knees, submerged in the snow where he was kneeling. The sound of Eric's cries rang out into the cold, wintry landscape, before a sinister hush fell over the depressing scene. The howl of the wind was almost spine-chilling, drowning out China's gasps as she struggled for breath.

Their turmoil was strangely interrupted by the unexpected sound of horses' hooves and the clattering wheels of a carriage. The sound drew closer and closer, and yet nothing but the drifting flakes of snow and the hints of boughs and branches could be seen. Although visibility was poor, it was the hot air rising from the horses' nostrils that drew Dr Rickman's attention to the outline of the carriage. Eric stood up and called out so that the coachman might notice them. The team of six horses neighed loudly as the luxurious four-wheeled carriage came to a halt in front of Eric. The coachman, who was dressed in fashion from the turn of the twentieth century, stepped down from the riding buggy at the front of the carriage and pulled out a set of steps from under the bottom of the carriage, before opening the door. Eric and Dr Rickman looked on as the hand of a man wearing a jewel-encrusted ring and the embroidered cuff of a military uniform beckoned them to step

inside the carriage. Both Eric and the doctor glanced quickly at one another with puzzled expressions, before silently making their way towards the door of the carriage.

Eric was the first to enter the carriage, so he could take a proper hold of China after Dr Rickman had carried her up the steps. As soon as the doctor entered the carriage and seated himself comfortably, the coachman closed the door and repositioned the steps underneath the carriage. China's body lay across both Eric and Dr Rickman's laps. The finely dressed couple sitting across from them stared on in silence. It was obvious from the luxurious décor of the carriage and their extravagant dress, that this was a royal couple. Finally, the lady made an attempt to break the silence and leaned across the carriage, stroking China's hair as she spoke. Dr Rickman wasn't quite sure what language the lady spoke, but he assumed that she was Polish. Eric, on the other hand, had correctly guessed that the lady was speaking Russian. She was dressed in a formal but elegant, floor-length ball gown with lace trimmings. A string of pearls hung loosely from her neck, while diamonds dangled from her earlobes. The lady's husband cut the figure of a fine and powerful man, dressed impeccably in the naval uniform of an admiral, with gold buttons and trimmings. He was a distinguished-looking gentleman, with a well-groomed beard and a long handlebar moustache. The regal-looking man remained silent as he stared pensively at both Eric and Dr Rickman.

"Do you speak English, Miss?" Eric questioned the lady, but his attempt to communicate was in vain, as she continued to speak Russian.

Dr Rickman pulled his stethoscope out of his bag and placed it upon China's breast. He continued to hold her by the wrist, feeling for her pulse. The carriage rattled and swayed from side to side as it crossed some rough terrain. China's breath began to deteriorate even more. Her eyelids suddenly began to flutter and her eyes struggled to open as she drew her last breath. Her cold body flopped ever so slightly, as her vital signs began to fade.

"She's gone." Dr Rickman's tone was gentle as he looked into

Eric's grief-stricken face. "The struggle is over. She can't feel any more pain," he added.

This was of no consolation to Eric, who bent his head over her body as he wept. The Russian lady knelt in front of Eric and placed her hand on top of his. Her voice was tender as she spoke and although Eric had no idea what it was that she was saying, he discerned that she was attempting to console him.

The carriage suddenly came to a grinding halt. The coachman lowered the steps and opened the carriage door with great haste. The Russian couple quickly dismounted while the lady called out with immense urgency in her voice to the servants who were lined to greet them. As Dr Rickman alighted from the carriage, he noticed a maid running swiftly along after receiving her orders. His eyes followed the young girl as she ran towards an enormous snow-covered palace. The couple were indeed royalty. As Eric passed China's body down into the hands of Dr Rickman, he noticed that her lips had turned blue. The kind Russian lady held the doctor's arm and tried in vain to communicate with him in her mother tongue, gently ushering him towards the intimidatingly large palace doors.

The snow crunched beneath Dr Rickman's feet as he followed the lady, almost running to keep up with her as she dashed through the palace doors. The grand entrance hall to the palace was impressively spacious and luxurious in design. The walls and ceiling positively dripped with solid gold and the enormous, gold-framed paintings that adorned the walls were centuries old. As impressive as the interior of the palace was, Eric paid no attention to the décor.

The Russian lady was already halfway up the most magnificently decorative baroque staircase the doctor had ever laid eyes upon. His career had occasionally led him to make callouts to the most elegant of households, but never before had he entered under the roof of a fine Russian palace.

Dr Rickman carried China in his arms as he followed the lady up

the stairs into one of the lavishly decorated bedrooms on the east wing of the palace. The lady had disappeared behind a pair of plush, velvet, red curtains, which draped from the ceiling right down to the marble floor. The comforting scent of lavender washed over the doctor as he made his way through the velvet curtains. He was instantly startled to come face-to-face with a rather peculiar-looking man standing directly in his path. The man stared coldly into the doctor's face for longer than was considered polite. His face was hidden beneath an overgrown, wiry beard, as long, greasy strands of hair trailed in front of his disturbing, grey eyes, which seemed to bore into the very depths of the doctor's soul. The man's entire appearance was completely unkempt. His clothing consisted of a long, dark, floor-length smock with rosary beads hanging about his neck, giving the appearance of a scruffily clad monk. Still blocking Dr Rickman's way, the sinister-looking figure glanced downwards at China with his horrid eyes, staring intensely at her, before stepping backwards and gesturing towards a large, four-poster bed, so that the doctor could lay her out. The lady gave a comforting nod and a slight curtsy to Dr Rickman before leaving the room.

Eric had followed the doctor up the stairs and was standing in the doorway.

Dr Rickman wasn't sure why the brute of a man, with his strange grey eyes, was standing over China's body and was even more perplexed by the fact that the lady had suddenly left the room. It came as a complete surprise to the doctor to hear the man speak English.

"My name is Grigori Rasputin." His voice was deep as he spoke, with a thick Russian accent. He was staring wildly into Dr Rickman's eyes, making him feel a little uneasy.

The doctor didn't introduce himself, but instead waited for the man to continue addressing him.

"You are now a guest of Tsar Nicholas the Second and Tsarina Alexandra at the Alexander Palace of Imperial Russia," Rasputin continued, all the while staring hard into Dr Rickman's eyes.

Rasputin dropped his gaze from Dr Rickman to China, who by now lay utterly lifeless upon the silk bedsheets.

"You must leave us now," Rasputin informed Dr Rickman in an authoritative tone, a tone that the doctor didn't care for. Rasputin hadn't expected defiance and was obliged to try a gentler approach. "You have done all you could, Doctor, now please trust me to do what needs to be done."

"But she's already dead," the doctor declared. "There is nothing more anyone can do for her at this stage."

"Please leave," came Rasputin's reply as he began to bless himself.

Dr Rickman wasn't a religious man and opted to make an exit as soon as he had deduced that Rasputin wished to perform some class of last rite on the body. The lady, who happened to be Tsarina, returned to the room and politely ushered Eric and the doctor out into the corridor, shutting the door behind her. She smiled warmly and touched them both gently on the arm as she began to speak. Although they couldn't understand the words, her message had sounded rather sweet. She left both gentlemen standing clueless in the corridor and began to descend the staircase, floating along in her finery, as the hem of her dress trailed along the ground behind her.

"Why can't we be with her?" Eric quizzed Dr Rickman. He was frantic with grief and pulled at the collar of his shirt to loosen it a little. Dr Rickman made no reply and instead stared downwards at the reflection that his shoes had made on the ornate marble floor. He wasn't content to be left standing in the corridor, unsure of what he was waiting for. Curiosity got the better of the doctor and he crept towards the bedroom door, which had been left slightly ajar. He made no sound as he tiptoed through the door towards the red, velvet drapes. Keeping himself hidden, he spied on the bizarrely dressed mystic, who was standing at the foot of the bed where China lay. The room was dimly lit. Two large, gold candelabras, adorned with brightly burning candles, stood next to the bed. The only other source of light came from a small electric

lamp in the far corner of the room. At first the doctor assumed that Rasputin was quietly praying for China's soul and watched as he walked to the side of the bed to anoint her with oils. Dr Rickman shook his head as he frowned. He had been in the presence of death so many times and had witnessed the 'Hocus Pocus' performed by men of the cloth on many occasions and yet he had never developed a tolerance for it. Feeling that he had seen enough fanfare, he turned to creep back out of the room. Just as he began to make his way towards the bedroom door, a luminous glow began to emanate from the direction of the bed, capturing the doctor's attention. Forgetting himself, Dr Rickman turned back in his tracks, stepping further beyond the red drapes to get a closer look at the mystical scene. He could hardly believe his eyes as he watched China's body levitating in mid-air. Her lifeless body was floating at least two feet from the mattress, as it gleamed with a dazzling bluish-white light. Rasputin was chanting loudly in a language that the doctor recognised to be Latin. The louder he chanted, the brighter China's body seemed to glow. Curiosity eventually got the better of Eric as he crept in behind the doctor. He gasped loudly at the sight of China's body floating in mid-air, lighting up the dark corners of the room as it gleamed intensely.

"What on earth is happening?" Eric questioned Dr Rickman, whispering loudly into his ear. The outlandish sight was almost too much for Eric to witness and his voice quivered a little as he continued to quiz the doctor. "What is he doing to her?"

Dr Rickman didn't respond to Eric's questions; he had no answers and couldn't take his eyes away from China. They both looked on in silence as Rasputin continued to perform his marvel. Dr Rickman stared at China's complexion in disbelief as he watched the rosy hue of life being restored to her cheeks. Her pale skin was beginning to flush with warmth and her entire face radiated. Dr Rickman was in awe of the miracle being performed before him and couldn't hold himself back any longer as he stepped even further beyond the red drapes, watching China's eyes open as if she had awoken from the deepest sleep. Rasputin's face

grimaced and his eyes remained tightly shut. He was absorbed in a deep trance, which didn't break as Dr Rickman edged his way to the foot of the bed to greet China. Eric followed the doctor's lead. China's entire being continued to radiate as the blood once more began to course through her veins. Ever so gently, her body began to descend towards the bed. She beamed with happiness, smiling at Dr Rickman as his eyes started welling up with tears. He smiled back at her, shaking his head from side to side, unable to believe how it was possible that she had been restored back to life. It wasn't in the doctor's nature to cry and so he quickly composed himself, before stepping back and beckoning for Eric to come forward to the foot of the bed. Eric was slow to move and stared at China in shock. She sat up and reached her arms out to him. Eric dashed towards the bed and threw his arms around her, laughing hysterically. He paused only to cup her face in his hands as he frenziedly kissed her cheeks, before continuing to laugh again with joy.

The blissful moment was interrupted by Rasputin knocking against a picture frame on the locker, as he stumbled towards a chair next to the bed. He was weak and overcome by exhaustion. As he sat back in the lavishly upholstered chair, Rasputin took a white handkerchief from a pocket in his smock and dabbed at the perspiration upon his brow. Both Dr Rickman and Eric draped an arm around China, helping her up onto her feet. Dr Rickman was compelled to examine her back for the wound, but found no evidence of her skin having been pierced.

"Is this what you are looking for?" Rasputin asked the doctor, holding an outstretched hand towards him.

Dr Rickman stepped towards the mystical man to get a closer look at what he was holding in the palm of his hand.

"The bullet!" Dr Rickman gasped in amazement. "But how is it possible?" It wasn't enough for Dr Rickman to see the bullet in Rasputin's hand; he felt the urge to touch it, so he could believe what he was seeing. The doctor took the bullet from Rasputin's hand. It felt warm to the touch. He held it a while and gazed at it in wonder, before placing it back in the palm of Rasputin's hand.

The doctor noticed how the man's hands were like large shovels and thought to himself how the mystic looked as if he were capable of killing a man with his bare hands. The very idea of it was a stark contrast to the reality, that the man could in fact restore life to the dead. Being a man of medicine, Dr Rickman felt obliged to give China a thorough medical examination and went out into the corridor to fetch his bag. When he returned to the room, he noticed that Rasputin was standing closely behind China, tying something around her neck.

"For luck," Rasputin said in a gravelly tone, with his deep Russian accent. "Wear it for protection."

Looking downwards, China could see that he had tied a quartz crystal around her neck. She turned around to face the bulk of a man and embraced him with a hug, thanking him for saving her life.

"You need not thank me," replied Rasputin. "You were not meant to die at that moment in time, not like that."

Eric and Dr Rickman were just as baffled as China by his remark.

"The powers that be have much bigger plans for you," Rasputin continued, unaware of the bemused looks exchanged between Eric and Dr Rickman.

"Time will always be on your side, my child. You must learn to embrace your gifts. Do not be frightened by them. You will eventually find the way forward," Rasputin continued. "All will be revealed in good time."

China was utterly perplexed by Rasputin's words of wisdom. Absolutely nothing he had said made any sense to her. She had no idea what he was referring to when he mentioned that she had gifts and not to be frightened by them. There was no doubt in her mind that Rasputin was a highly intelligent man, but he was beginning to sound somewhat like a quack. Dr Rickman decided to put an end to Rasputin's gibbering by politely asking him and Eric to leave the room while he examined China in privacy. Although the doctor was impressed by the wonder they had witnessed, he had

no time for riddles and nonsense. He was a man of science and was certain that the miraculous feat that Rasputin had performed was somehow achieved scientifically, with some decree of a logical explanation. The doctor was a man who had a short fuse when it came to charlatans and mystics. He didn't believe in prophecies and had no time for pointless riddles. Rasputin was very conscious of the fact that the doctor didn't hold him in high regard. He glared at Dr Rickman with his menacing, grey eyes. He continued to stare with such a look of disdain that the doctor began to feel threatened. Dr Rickman boldly held Rasputin's gaze. Neither one of them blinked. The doctor wasn't afraid to let Rasputin know how little he respected men of the cloth, especially those who seemed to speak prophetically, claiming to know more than they were capable of knowing.

"You can leave now," Dr Rickman brazenly stated.

Rasputin paused for what seemed like too long a moment, before turning to follow Eric out of the room.

The paths of the two opposing forces didn't cross again until after China had been examined and the three guests had been invited to join the Tsar and Tsarina for dinner.

It wasn't until they were all sitting together comfortably at a lengthy marble table in the main dining hall of the palace that Rasputin stood up on ceremony to formally introduce Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra to their three stunned guests. Eric had read a little about the Tsar and the political upheaval in Russia from time to time in the papers, but he was certainly no expert on Russian politics. Despite his lack of knowledge, he was in awe of the Tsar and Tsarina and marvelled at the thought of dining with them.

"Can you please tell us what year this is?" China enquired of Rasputin, before taking a sip of wine from her glass.

Eric's eyebrows raised slightly as he waited for the answer. It hadn't dawned on Eric that someone should have asked the important question by now.

"It is the year nineteen hundred and nine," Rasputin replied, staring intensely into China's inquisitive eyes.

"Nineteen hundred and nine," China repeated with a startled expression.

Eric was equally shocked, as it meant that the First World War hadn't yet taken place.

China became lost for a moment in her own thoughts, contemplating the fact that she was the only soul sitting at the dining table who knew what the future had in store for Imperial Russia. The execution of the Tsar and his family in 1917 flashed into her mind, followed by the fall of Imperial Russia. She dared not divulge her knowledge of the civil war that would follow or the establishment of a Bolshevik Communist Government. Feeling it wise to keep her burdening thoughts to herself, China silently stared at the glistening gold that adorned the dinner table in front of her. The lamps, candelabras and tableware were all dripping with gold, which sparkled as it caught the flickering light from the candles. Looking down at her fork, she remained pensive and silent as she stared at its golden hue.



CHAPTER 12
ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE
STREET



At long last there was an end to the perpetual darkness of the time warp's clutch. Once again, the sun's rays seeped through the cover of night as the daylight charged forward to chase the darkness away. Despite the harsh sting of winter, China revelled in her time spent at court. It was simply glorious to wake each morning, after a deep, peaceful slumber on a soft bed fit for a queen. China felt as if she had landed on her feet. The Tsar and Tsarina had made their new guests feel quite at home in the palace and the weeks seemed to quickly roll on by. China was beginning to enjoy the company of the Tsar's four young daughters and was particularly fond of the Grand Duchess Tatiana, whom had warmed to her from their first meeting. She was a slender, pretty-looking girl with wide, grey eyes and dark auburn hair. The white, muslin dresses she often wore suited her pale complexion. China was surprised by how tall she was for a twelve-year-old. The Grand Duchess spent many hours a day in China's company, walking through the snow-covered palace gardens and exploring the many forbidden parts to the palace.

The immense size of the palace wasn't obvious from the outside. It wasn't until China had spent a considerable number of

hours wandering through its various corridors and courtyards that she realised just how big the palace was. There were over one hundred staircases and one and a half thousand rooms throughout the palace. It took China several weeks to find her way around the main living quarters without becoming lost. Enormous tapestries, gold-gilded oil paintings and mirrors covered the walls at every turn. Oversized marble statues and lavish furnishings took up every available space.

Dr Rickman was at the Tsar's disposal and lent a helping hand to the court physician, Dr Botkin, with whom he spent many an hour in heated debate, regarding the best practice for the care of patients. Dr Botkin's command of English was rather good and although he argued passionately with Dr Rickman over many issues, he had considerable respect for the man. Dr Rickman was content to discover that the court physician was also of the opinion that Rasputin was nothing but a charlatan and so they had some common ground upon which to base their complicated friendship.

Eric, on the other hand, felt somewhat idle during his time at the palace, giving him the notion that he didn't quite fit in. Living the high life alongside Russian nobility in the early years of the twentieth century was a far cry from the life of a British soldier during the First World War. It was just too much for Eric to adjust to. The more time China spent out of his company, the more homesick he became, pining for the days he spent during his military training when he had first met his sweetheart in Ireland.

It was Dr Rickman who first noticed how withdrawn Eric had become. From time to time, Eric would pull out the photo of his beloved Maureen and mull over what might have been. He had toyed with the idea of contacting her, but realised that it was another six years before he was due to meet her for the very first time. The reality was that she would have no idea who he was. He would just be some random stranger, claiming to have travelled back in time. He could hardly declare his undying love for her if they had never even met and certainly couldn't inform her of their

future engagement. He was aware of how crazy the idea was and knew that it would never work.

Eric began to spend a lot of time alone in the study, reading books while sipping brandy at a comforting fireside. It was while Eric was wallowing in his own self-pity beside a blazing fire one particularly chilly evening that Dr Rickman and China decided to locate him, with the intention of quizzing him about his absence from dinner. The music from the ballroom below vibrated throughout the study as the orchestra played a waltz by Tchaikovsky.

Eric's chair was facing the fire and his back was to the door. He didn't hear the door of the study open or the rustle of China's ball gown trailing along the floor as she moved towards him. Standing over Eric's shoulder, China was saddened to see that Eric was holding his fiancée's photo in his hand. Although it broke her heart, she placed a hand upon Eric's shoulder to soothe him. As he turned to face her, she could see that he had been crying.

"Please leave me be," Eric requested in a cold manner, which she wasn't accustomed to. Dr Rickman stood next to China and placed his hand upon her arm for support.

"Everyone has been asking for you at dinner, Eric. I was ... we were just concerned about you. We haven't seen much of you lately." China kneeled on her hunkers and placed her hands on Eric's knees, coming face-to-face with him as she endeavoured to make eye contact with him. Eric wouldn't look her in the eye as he spoke.

"I asked you to leave me alone."

The frostiness in his tone convinced China that it would perhaps be best to leave him alone. She immediately stood up and walked out of the room.

Dr Rickman remained behind for a moment to have a word in Eric's ear. His attempt to coax Eric into joining them downstairs was in vain and when he followed China out onto the corridor he found her slumped over the top of the staircase as her eyes began to fill with tears. A servant, who had started to make her way up

the staircase, noticed that China was clearly distressed. Not wanting to draw the maid's attention to China's anguish, Dr Rickman led her by the shoulders into one of the adjoining rooms next to the study to compose herself. It was an elaborately furnished bedroom. Dr Rickman closed the door behind him, before leading China over to the bed, where she threw herself down upon it and buried her face in a lace pillow as she wept. The doctor pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat patiently waiting for her to catch her breath. Her sobbing gradually subsided and she lifted her head from the pillow to face the doctor.

"I can't understand why he's suddenly so distant with me. He's changed so much. He used to be so affectionate with me and now he seems to be so cold. What have I done wrong?" China studied Dr Rickman's face for answers that he simply couldn't give her. Leaning forward, the doctor tilted China's face upwards by her chin and wiped away the tears spilling down her cheeks.

"You already know that he loves another woman, my dear." Dr Rickman's tone was low and hushed as he spoke to her. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"I can't help how I feel, Doctor," China responded, sighing deeply to release her feelings of dejection. Dr Rickman smiled tenderly at her and held her delicate face in his hands as he gazed into her wide, dark blue eyes.

"You are far too pretty to frown so much," he remarked, which made China smile ever so slightly. Continuing to hold her gaze, the doctor leaned forward even closer to her and kissed her softly on the cheek. "If you were my daughter and a man made you cry, I would probably challenge him to a duel! But you're not my daughter and Eric is a rather pleasant chap!" Dr Rickman teased, which again drew a smile from China's lips. The doctor stood up and walked over to the window to look out upon the courtyard below. He was silent for a moment as he stood and watched a horse-drawn carriage pulling away from the palace gates. The contrast of the dark silhouette of the carriage against the gleaming white snow held the doctor's attention for longer than he had

intended. As he turned his back to the window and faced China, he began to pour his heart out to her.

"We cannot always have what we want in this life. I know exactly how it feels to pine for someone you cannot have." Dr Rickman stepped towards the end of the bed where China rested and sat next to her before he continued. "I had a wife before I disappeared from London. I haven't seen her in over twenty years. The most heart-breaking part of it all is that I wasn't there for her when she died. I attempted to contact her on the other side many times, but it seems that she has long since crossed over. I simply have to accept the fact that I'm trapped in time and will more than likely never see my wife again."

The rare glimpse into Dr Rickman's personal life seemed to put things into perspective for China. She realised that there was a much softer side to the doctor than he cared to show the rest of the world. China was beginning to feel a little foolish about crying over Eric in front of him. She appreciated that the doctor must have been tormented by the fact that he had been separated from his wife for so long. Having gathered herself together, she stood up and smoothed out the creases in her dress.

"Perhaps you'll do me the honour of saving me a dance, Dr Rickman?"

Linking the doctor's arm, China gathered her dress and lifted the hem above her foot as she led him out onto the corridor. Not another word of Eric or the doctor's wife was spoken as Dr Rickman escorted China into the crowded ballroom.

The following morning began to show promising signs of spring as China looked out of her bedroom window. The snow had slowly started to melt and the warm sunlight illuminated newly budding trees where birds began to construct their nests. Despite knowing that their new-found comforts wouldn't last forever, China didn't dwell upon the fact that it could have ended at any given moment. There were so many wonderful diversions in her new life to distract her from distressing thoughts.

After breakfast, Tatiana and China took a carriage into St

Petersburg for a long promised guided tour of the city. China was greatly impressed by the Russian architecture and commented on how some of the more elaborately designed buildings resembled doll's houses. Thin layers of snow coated the pavements and rooftops, giving the illusion that their carriage had driven them into the depths of a wintery fairy tale.

While they were parked at the Red Square, Tatiana began to confide in China about her desire to become a nurse. China began to fill Tatiana's head with accounts from her time spent in the Red Cross, failing to mention any involvement in a war. She dared not breathe a word about time travel to one single soul.

Tatiana revealed to China how Rasputin had been a major influence on her decision to study medicine. She seemed to idolise the man and sang his praises for saving her brother's life on more than one occasion. Her brother, Tsarevich Alexei, like most of the royal Romanov family, suffered from a rare blood disease known as haemophilia. After an injury some years before, Alexei began to bleed profusely. Doctors could do nothing to stop the bleeding and had advised the family to prepare for the worst. Tatiana informed China that if it were not for the timely intervention of Rasputin and his healing powers, her brother would have died that very night. She revealed that not only was Rasputin a healer and prophet, but he was also a mystic advisor to the Tsarina.

"He was the reason you came to stay with us!" Tatiana announced gleefully.

China wasn't sure what was meant by the statement and presumed that something had been lost in translation.

"I don't quite follow what you mean," China declared.

"The night you were shot, Rasputin had a vision and told my mother where to find you in the forest. He speaks so highly of you. He told us that you were destined for greatness." Tatiana placed her hands upon China's hands and squeezed them as she spoke. "I really do hope you and I remain great friends!" she added.

China was dumbfounded by the revelation. She couldn't fathom the reason why a Russian mystic had a vision of her being

shot, or why he felt the urge to save her life. Just what was meant by being 'destined for greatness' made absolutely no sense to her whatsoever.

The carriage continued its journey and the moment it passed the Winter Palace, Tatiana changed the subject entirely. She told China all about the palace where they used to live, until it became too dangerous for the family to reside there due to political unrest. China once again felt the heavy burden of knowing the horrors that lay ahead of the Tsar and his family. It would have been unimaginable for China to divulge her secrets, informing Tatiana that she would die at the tender age of twenty-one. A lump was beginning to form in China's throat. It had struck her that Rasputin might have possibly foreseen the tragic circumstances to come for the Romanov family. If he was aware, history had clearly proven that he didn't intervene.

During the excursion, Tatiana pointed to a long, five-storey building on the outskirts of the city. It was St Petersburg City Hospital. Tatiana informed China that the hospital was always looking for volunteers and that she was hopeful of securing a position there on a voluntary basis, with her father's permission. Tatiana cunningly suggested that she would have a better chance of gaining her father's permission if China were to volunteer with her. China had no reason to refuse and so they had planned to discuss the matter with the Tsar later that evening, after dinner.

As they arrived back at Alexander Palace, China spotted Dr Rickman strolling through the gardens with Eric. They both appeared to be deep in conversation. China was glad to see that Eric was once again making the effort to socialise. It further pleased her that he joined them in the dining hall for dinner that evening. It was obvious that Eric's attempt to integrate was down to Dr Rickman having a word in his ear.

Dinner had been rather uneventful except for the unfortunate antics of a servant who was being newly trained. The nervous servant clumsily tripped over, smashing a tray full of crockery on the marble floor of the dining hall. It had stirred up a great deal of

excitement at the dinner table and managed to offset the Tsar's temper, as he banished the unfortunate young man from court. Tatiana didn't consider that it was bad timing to approach her father, seeking his permission to volunteer at the hospital. She was sorely disappointed by his stern refusal and ran to her room like the schoolgirl that she was to have a good cry. China decided to volunteer by herself and waited until the next day to announce her intentions to Eric and Dr Rickman. Eric thought it was an excellent idea and wondered if he too should devote some of his time to helping at the hospital with China. The idea seemed to put a spark back in Eric's step and made him feel useful again. Dr Rickman, on the other hand, wasn't too keen on the idea and suggested that China would be better suited to lending a hand with his patients at court, if she felt the need to put her talents to good use. The doctor's main argument on the subject was that the city hospital was overcrowded with patients and rife with all manner of disease. China felt that the doctor was being a little overprotective and made the point that if the hospital was so overcrowded, her assistance was needed all the more.

It was a welcome sight to see Eric smile again as he helped China into the carriage the following morning. The hospital was a half an hour away, which gave Eric the perfect opportunity to spend some time alone with her.

Although she enjoyed her days spent at the hospital, China's favourite part of the day was the ride in the carriage to and from work. As time ticked on, Eric began to open up even more to her.

Spring had come and gone and the summer was finally in bloom. The hospital was everything that Dr Rickman had said it would be: overcrowded and rife with all types of disease. It was a challenge to work alongside nurses and doctors of the era, with no concept of the advancements in medicine in the future. The extent of their medical knowledge was limited to their time and place in the universe. At times, it was frustrating for China to watch patients die, due to the lack of hygiene standards practiced by the nurses and doctors. A great number of patients died from infec-

tions, which could have been treated successfully, had penicillin been invented at the time. China did her best under the circumstances, while Eric put his administration skills to good use.

It was a particularly bright sunny morning when Eric placed a white rose in China's hair as she sat next to him in the carriage on the way to the hospital to start their shift together. Eric was in a rather playful mood and twirled a lock of China's hair around his finger, while he gazed into her eyes. She became lost in his gaze and failed to notice that the carriage had taken a wrong turn along the road, leading them in the opposite direction of the hospital. Enough time had passed for her to notice that the carriage was travelling in the wrong direction and although she drew Eric's attention to it, he didn't appear to be alarmed by it. On the contrary, Eric was in high spirits as he began to sing and whistle.

"Where are we going, Eric?" enquired China as she grew increasingly suspicious of his good humour.

Eric didn't answer her question, but instead continued to whistle a happy tune.

The carriage came to an unexpected stop outside a church in a small village, which China had never been to.

"Why have we stopped outside a church, Eric? What are we doing here?"

China was aware that Eric must have instructed the coachman to take them to the village, but she was baffled by the reason for it. Eric continued to ignore China's questions and hopped gaily out of the carriage so that he could lend her a hand as she descended the steps. Taking her by the arm, Eric led her towards the door of the church, stopping directly in front of it to tell her how beautiful she looked before leading her inside.

The interior of the church was rather plain, except for the beautiful garland of white roses that draped from pew to pew on either side of the aisle. China could see that there was a small congregation seated at the top of the church. A smiling priest stood in the centre of the altar, as if he had been waiting for the couple's arrival. The familiar face of a young girl at the edge of a

pew turned around to greet them. It was Tatiana. Dr Rickman stepped out from his seat and walked down the aisle towards them as they stood in the doorway.

"I don't understand," declared China with a perplexed look upon her brow. "What's going on, Eric?" China was more demanding in her tone, insisting that he divulge the big secret.

"Are we all ready to go?" Dr Rickman enquired, smiling intensely with his eyes fixed upon China.

"I haven't asked her yet!" Eric seemed to giggle nervously as he spoke and turned to China before he posed the question. "Will you be my wife, China Winter?" he asked her, so earnestly and so sweetly that she found it difficult to answer him immediately with the lump that formed in her throat. Her eyes glistened as they filled with tears of happiness and she nodded frantically before she managed to say yes.

Eric swiftly placed Dr Rickman's arm around China's waist, instructing him to take care of her as he walked proudly up the aisle of the church to take his place. Dr Rickman leaned in close to China's face as he whispered to her.

"May I have the honour of giving you away, young lady?" Dr Rickman squeezed her hand tightly as he linked her arm, awaiting her teary-eyed reply.

"I can think of no one else I would rather have to escort me!" China replied in a hushed tone, before wiping the tears from her cheeks.

The doctor kissed her paternally on the cheek before leading her towards her groom.

It had been a bittersweet day for China as she reminisced about the fact that her grandfather wasn't there to witness the happiest day of her life.

Celebrating their marriage with a huge banquet at Alexander Palace made China feel as if she and Eric were royalty for a day. A lavish ball was held in their honour and they danced the night away. It was while China danced with Dr Rickman that he confessed to having endless heart-to-hearts with Eric, with the

intention of helping him move on from his fiancée. Eric had admitted his feelings for China, but revealed his guilt for wanting to get over his fiancée. He was certain that she had moved on with her own life after his death. Aware that his soul was trapped in time, Eric knew that he was unable to cross over to be with loved ones on the other side. The fact was that he would never meet his fiancée again.

As the orchestra played the last song of the night, a thunder storm raged outside. China had been standing next to a window overlooking the main courtyard when a clatter of thunder rolled violently through the darkened heavens above the palace. Looking out of the window, China immediately thought of Maddox. There had been a storm the night he had gone missing. She remembered sitting up with her grandfather as the thunder roared above the rooftop of the workshop as she listened to him make numerous calls, desperately trying to locate his only grandson. China stood and stared at the brooding sky as the darkness was lit up by the occasional streaks of lightning, tearing through the atmosphere. The entire ballroom lit up with each brilliant-white flash. As she stood staring out of the window, China was unaware that Rasputin was standing directly behind, staring at her. She wished so hard that she would see Jodie once more, sure that she could help locate her brother. She held her breath and as she made the wish, her gaze became fixated on a large boulder to one side of the garden. As she stared intensely, a blinding flash of white lightning dazzled her vision, hitting the boulder directly and splitting it neatly in two. It was as if her wish was being answered by the freak lightning strike and the earth-shattering roar of thunder that accompanied it.

"You will get your wish, dear child," Rasputin suddenly spoke, as he stood close to her ear, causing China to almost jump out of her skin with fright. "Although you should be more careful what you wish for as it may not make you happy." Rasputin continued to rattle China's cage. Being used to his sinister manner and peculiar riddles, China didn't take his words too seriously, although his

pensive eyes were beginning to make her feel quite edgy. She was soon relieved to be joined by Eric, before Rasputin got the chance to say anything more.

Although she had been nervous retiring to bed that night, Eric had brought such pleasure to his newlywed wife that she felt blissfully at home in his arms. Eric reached his hands out towards his bride, gently pulling her close to his chest. She felt his heart racing as he held her tighter. His lips frantically parted hers as he threw her down upon the bed like a rag doll.

Waking up beside her husband the next morning was a heavenly feeling. Never before had she experienced such a strong connection or attraction to any other man and felt even more devoted to him than ever. Eric hadn't objected to China's wish to pay tribute to her grandfather by keeping her maiden name. He truly adored his bride and vowed to take care of her until the end of time. Having met under the most unlikely of circumstances, their time together so far had been extremely erratic and it frightened him to consider that time itself could ironically tear them apart.

The happy couple had spent three glorious days together, before returning to work at the city hospital. They hadn't planned to return to work so soon, but had received word of an outbreak of cholera, which had hit the city hard in recent days. All hands were needed on deck and even the court physician, Dr Botkin, along with Dr Rickman, had volunteered to be of assistance. Conditions at the hospital were chaotic. Although it was inappropriate to admit, Dr Rickman had commented that the only solution to the unacceptable overcrowding was the unfortunate deaths of patients that had succumbed to cholera's deathly grip. The work was back-breaking, but China proved her strength, never stopping for a break until the late hours of the evening. She had worked tirelessly from dusk until dawn, scrubbing floors, washing laundry, bathing patients, assisting doctors with surgery, administering pain relief, cleaning and dressing wounds. Her duties were never ending.

Feeling a tad faint one busy afternoon, China decided that it

would be wise to take a well-earned break. She sipped sweet tea as she sat on a stool by the main doorway, which had been left ajar, allowing the air to cool the ground-floor ward. She was beginning to feel drained and looked forward to slipping between the sheets later for a good night's sleep. Just as she tilted her head back, rubbing the strained muscles in her neck, a tall figure stood over her, too close for comfort to be a stranger.

"I don't believe it! China! Is it really you?" an excited cry came from the young woman who towered over China, as she sat on the stool, looking up in amazement.

"Jodie! Jodie!" China exclaimed as she leapt up off the chair and threw her arms around the woman. "You can't imagine how glad I am to see you!" China beamed as she hugged Jodie tightly. "What are you doing here, Jodie?" she asked, waiting for the answer with baited breath.

"I heard they needed more doctors due to the cholera epidemic and decided to lend a helping hand. I was based in a field hospital not far from here some time ago. The camp was attacked by rebels, so we've been forced to relocate."

Jodie stepped outside the doorway of the hospital and took a pack of cigarettes out of the breast pocket of her shirt. She fumbled with the lighter as she placed a cigarette between her lips.

"Since when did you start smoking?" China quizzed.

"Since I ended up on a cattle train destined for Auschwitz during World War Two," Jodie replied. "If that didn't kill me, nothing will," she added as she took a drag of her cigarette and winked at China. "By the way, China, I've got some news about your brother." Jodie's tone was more subdued as she began to speak of Maddox. "I sent you a postcard, but I didn't expect that you would get it."

"I got your postcard, but it wasn't in great condition. All I could make out was that you had news of Maddox."

"Yes ... but it's not good news I'm afraid, China. I met Maddox ..." Jodie paused, pondering how best to broach the subject.

China's heart began to race and her eyes widened in anticipation.

"I met Maddox on the train to Auschwitz. I'm so sorry, China. I recognised him from the photo you had shown me. His appearance hadn't changed much since he was a teenager. I introduced myself and told him that you were searching for him." Jodie took another pull on her cigarette before she went on. "We all got separated upon our arrival; women and children to one side and men to the other. I saw him being badly beaten by an SS officer, before being marched away with a large group of men. That was in nineteen forty-two. It was the last I ever saw of him. I don't know whatever became of him. The only thing that saved me was the fact that I was a doctor and could be of some use to them. I survived long enough to witness Liberation Day in forty-five."

China wasn't sure at first how to take the news. She was happy that Jodie had seen him alive, but under the circumstances, the outlook wasn't very promising. What baffled China was the fact that it was now 1909, which meant that she would have to wait thirty more years before the start of the Second World War just to have the chance to attempt tracking him down.

Jodie was completely in the dark about the link between the War Office and the abduction of innocent civilians and was shocked to hear of their deliberate endorsement of war. She was aware, however, that people were increasingly becoming trapped in time and that time didn't appear to flow steadily in any one direction. Jodie informed China that she too had the microchip removed from her wrist, as it had been causing her so much pain. Jodie had mentioned that the only thing that helped to keep her grounded throughout the madness of their situation was to immerse herself in her work.

China shared her tales of strange encounters and remarked that she was glad for the fact that they now lived in a relatively peaceful time, except for the occasional scuffle between the Bolsheviks and civilians on the streets of St Petersburg. Jodie was thrilled to hear of China's recent marriage and had the opportunity to congratulate

late the groom before they left the hospital to go home for the night. They were leaving much earlier than usual and bid Jodie farewell until the following day. Dr Rickman had decided to stay on at the hospital overnight and return to the palace at sunrise, in time for breakfast.

China found it difficult to get to sleep that night, as her mind mulled over the fact that her brother could have possibly died in a concentration camp. Her heart was crushed to think of how he might have suffered in his final hours. It was unrealistic to presume that he would have survived the war.

Eric held China tightly in his arms as they both lay wide eyed, staring at the ceiling. The only suggestion Eric could think of was to use the timepiece that China had been given to call upon the messenger the following day, after finishing their shift at the hospital. Jodie had given her the location and the year that Maddox had last been seen. The fact that Maddox was being held a prisoner didn't dash China's hopes of making contact with him. That would be an issue for the messenger to work around.

The morning broke with a murky haze over the summer sky. China and Eric had already taken breakfast and the carriage awaited them outside. Dr Rickman hadn't returned home, so China had arranged to take his breakfast to him at the hospital. Seated comfortably in the carriage, China glanced through one of the ballroom windows and happened to catch Rasputin spying on them. He stared at the carriage with his incredibly harrowing eyes, which made her feel uneasy. It was at that moment that she recalled his words on her wedding night during the storm. He had told her that her wish to find her brother would come true. He had also warned her to be careful what she wished for. She remembered how surreal it was to observe a lightning bolt splitting a boulder in two.

Rasputin's eyes seemed to follow the carriage as it pulled away. China was glad when he was out of sight and began to relax back in her seat by her husband's side.

The haze began to quickly burn off as the sun beamed brightly

down upon the rooftops, streets and pavements. China stared out the window in a daze, watching the motions of daily life unfolding upon the streets as the carriage rolled on past. Women in long dresses and petticoats, with their hair neatly wrapped up under pretty bonnets and hats, held their children's hands as they walked along the pavement. Smartly dressed men in suits and hats, with pocket watches chained to their waistcoats, busily crossed the road and scurried along the paths on their way to work. The hustle and bustle of life in the early 1900s played out like an old black and white movie before China's very eyes. It was surreal to be part of the scenery, as she blended in with the souls from long ago. She was fascinated to watch people who had toiled through life's little drudgeries, died and were buried long before she was ever born. She had truly become lost in her own thoughts.

Suddenly, China became very confused. Looking at Eric's face, she realised that he was oblivious to how peculiar she was beginning to feel. It was difficult to put her finger on it, but something felt very wrong. She felt it deep inside her, almost as if she had instantly become overwhelmed by a deep depression. Something was very wrong. She sat up straight and looked out of the carriage window, attempting to distract herself from her feelings. It was of no use. Then something in the distance caught her eye, causing her to gasp out loud, drawing Eric's attention to her distress. Looking up at the top of the road, to the front of the carriage, it was teeming with rain. The sky was thick with grey clouds as the rain bucketed down upon the pavement. They had just turned the corner where the hospital ought to have been, but to the coachman's complete surprise, the building had completely vanished. The carriage came to a sudden halt and both China and Eric stepped outside. The sun, in its cloudless sky, still beamed down upon them where they were standing and yet further up the street the rain was pouring down. They watched in astonishment as ultra-modern-looking hovercrafts and disc-shaped objects floated along the streets in place of the horse-drawn carriages and vintage cars that they were accustomed to seeing each day. The people at

the top of the street were dressed in the most bizarre fashion, their clothing consisting of foil rather than fabric. China thought it odd that the futuristic-looking people looked so similar, all dressed identically in the same foil-like substance. Men, women and children all wore the same shiny clothing, which resembled a boiler suit, with their hair completely hidden by large metallic-looking helmets. Those who walked along the pavements walked in an orderly fashion, moving in single file like controlled automations. Not one person seemed to dare to cross the road. As they walked along, they seemed oblivious to the rain that hammered down on the pavement. China knew she was witnessing a future to which she didn't belong and she wasn't sure that she liked what she saw of it. Eric was almost out of his mind with fear.

"I can't live like that," Eric announced as he began to walk backwards, attempting to escape the time slip on the street up ahead. Looking back down the street behind them, China could still see the sun shining as life rolled along in 1909. China wanted just as much as Eric to stay in 1909, on the sunny side of the street.



CHAPTER 13
UNLUCKY FOR SOME



Eric dragged China by the arm and ran back down the street in the direction of the palace, avoiding the time slip. The further down the street they ran, the more the scenery began to change behind them. For each building they passed in 1909, another section of the streetscape had morphed into the future. Looking back over his shoulder, Eric began to panic when he realised that he couldn't run fast enough to escape the time slip. The future was beginning to catch up with them. The sunlight began to dim and time seemed to start slowing down. People and transportation on both sides of the time slip were moving at a much slower pace than usual. China found that even her thoughts were beginning to slow down. It then became difficult to speak, as she had to think much harder before she could produce any sound. Eric too was struggling to think or speak at a normal pace. Suddenly the world in which they had both dwelled for the past few months had somehow transformed into the ultramodern existence that had pursued them. As soon as they had become part of the new landscape, their thoughts and words began to form once more at a normal rate.

Although it wasn't apparent what year it was, they were both

certain that they were still in Russia. Although many buildings had disappeared, a small number remained intact. The traditional Russian architecture, with its distinct byzantine features of colourful brickwork, corbel arches, conical roofs and multiple onion-shaped domes, typical only of Eastern-Slavic architecture, had stood the test of time. The ancient, yet decorative buildings, churches and palaces stood in stark contrast to the plain and drab ultramodern architecture interspersed throughout the city.

A handful of people from 1909, who had also been transported into the future, were frantically wandering about the street. Dressed in their out-of-date clothing, they stood out from their unfamiliar surroundings. A vintage Russo-Balt automobile continued to drive down the modern-looking roadway, before eventually coming to an abrupt stop. The driver and passengers had abandoned the car and stood in the middle of the road, gaping all around them in total awe of what they were witnessing. The team of horses that had been pulling China and Eric's carriage had become spooked and broken away from their reigns. They galloped through the street, adding further mayhem to the situation. The rain teemed down upon them as they stood in the middle of the street, gaping at the oddities that surrounded them. Noticing how incredibly dark it had suddenly become, Eric's head tilted upwards to gaze at the monstrous, modern-looking, ten-storey building, which, extraordinarily enough, appeared to be floating on a steel platform high in the atmosphere above their heads. There were many such buildings suspended in the air on platforms, giving the appearance of floating cities. Fleets of queer-looking crafts floated through the air, carrying passengers and luggage to and fro. People had the unusual ability to float upwards towards the streets and buildings on the level above them without the aid of the jetpacks that were popular during China's time.

"What year is this?" Eric gasped, looking at China in bewilderment.

"I have no idea, Eric. Your guess is as good as mine. It's definitely beyond my timeline, that's for sure," replied China, watching

in amazement as a man, who had been walking on the pavement towards them, began to levitate in mid-air. The man proceeded to float up towards the city that hovered above them, so he could continue his journey through the streets that floated in the sky. China suspected that the people in this futuristic world had somehow discovered how to control and manipulate the laws of gravity.

Everything that surrounded them in this new world seemed to be completely alien to the life they once knew. Eric guessed that it was late in the evening, due to the dullness of the daylight and the fact that he could see streetlights glowing in the distance. On closer inspection, he realised that they were not street lights at all, but tall trees with glowing leaves and branches. Looking around, he noticed that there were in fact no street lights and the luminous trees lined up along the streets were the only source of light.

As he watched the people silently filing past, Eric thought it odd that people didn't appear to speak to one another. In fact, the people didn't even seem to be making eye contact with one another. Occasionally, a person would stop walking and stare straight ahead at a building they wished to enter. A beam of light shot out from a panel on the wall, appearing to scan the person from head to toe, before they proceeded to enter. The peculiar aspect about the buildings was the fact that there were no windows. It was impossible to distinguish one building from another, as there were no signs or facades to indicate whether they were commercial or residential buildings.

Wondering what year it was, China attempted to converse with a passer-by. The woman she approached kept her eyes fixed ahead of her, ignoring China as she spoke. After several attempts to engage in a conversation with people passing by, China was suspicious that there was something more sinister at work than a simple language barrier. She considered the possibility that people's minds were being controlled. They seemed completely disengaged with one another and uninterested in any form of human or social interaction.

The coachman, who had been standing silently by the carriage, suddenly realised that he was out of time and place, and started screaming with madness before he took into a fit of running. China watched as he ran down the road, screaming like a crazed lunatic in the rain.

"How are we supposed to fit into this world?" Eric quizzed China, his brow wrinkled with worry.

China had no answer for Eric, but she quickly decided that the only sensible thing they could both do at that moment was to get out of the torrential rain. They clambered back into the carriage and closed the door behind them. They both sat soaked to the skin as they gazed out the window at their new reality. It was difficult to fathom what they would do next. Being trapped in time and falling in and out of various time slips was an extremely difficult existence to endure, but China was thankful to have met Eric. She couldn't believe her luck that they hadn't been separated by time so far.

China and Eric remained silent as they stared at the raindrops trickling down the glass on either side of the carriage. China knew that their happy existence as guests at Alexander Palace wouldn't last forever, but she never expected it to be so short lived. They would both dearly miss their comforts, living a life of sheer luxury, and would simply have to find a way to eke out some sort of existence.

Their brooding thoughts were broken by the loud peel of bells ringing out from the belfry of a church across the street. The decorative face of the clock at the top of the belfry caught China's attention. It made her think of her grandfather's enthusiasm for horology, while at the same time reminding her how the simple stroke of a clock's hand could play so much havoc with their fate. She stared hard at the clock for a moment, before reaching deep into the pocket of her overcoat to search for the timepiece that she had been given by the messenger. The hands of the pocket watch were spinning wildly, back and forth in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions. She stared at the face of the watch as the hands continued to spin in an erratic manner,

before looking to Eric with puzzlement. Eric was just as confused as China.

"How can I set the watch if the hands keep spinning around?" asked China, even though she didn't expect Eric to have the answer. Suddenly the face of the watch began to mist over as if a thick fog had managed to seep inside the glass cover. The face slowly began to glow a bright greenish hue, before eventually returning to its normal condition. Once the numbers and inner workings of the cogs were visible again, the hands stopped spinning and rested at the number twelve. China turned the hands back by one hour, just as the messenger had instructed her to. Having to wait for an hour to pass, they were obliged to remain in the horseless carriage as the rain gushed down the side of the windows.

Time dragged on at a slow pace as they sat idly waiting for the messenger to arrive. Eric had so many questions for China as he gazed out the window in awe of the unrecognisable scenes of life that unfolded before his unbelieving eyes. He had been especially mystified by the sight of a woman and her young daughter completely vanishing into thin air as they stood under what Eric assumed to be a very modern-looking lamppost. A blue beam of light shone down upon the woman and child, completely enveloping them in a blue haze before they began to fade out of the atmosphere.

"They've ... they've ... China, they've completely disappeared," Eric yelled with excitement as he leapt off his seat to get closer to the window.

"It's OK, Eric," China chuckled. "They've just been teleported to another place. It's another form of transportation. We had telepods during my time too, but they were a great deal more primitive than that."

China took the time to fill Eric in on the history of teleportation. Eric was so engrossed by China's weird and wonderful stories that he was startled by the sharp knock on the window beside him. The rain had become so heavy that it was difficult to make out the

features of the person standing, peering in the windows of the carriage.

"It's him!" China declared, checking the time on the pocket watch before slipping it into the pocket of her overcoat. Eric opened the door to let the messenger into the carriage and was immediately taken by surprise to see that he wasn't completely solid in form, but half-faded like a ghost. Realising the shock on Eric's face, the messenger felt compelled to put him at ease.

"A hazard of astral travel, I'm afraid ... The energy tends to drain a bit when I've been on the road too long!"

China cut straight to the chase, wanting to make contact with her brother as soon as possible. "I need you to get a message to my brother, Maddox Winter."

"That will not be a problem, assuming you know the time and place I can find him," he replied, as he fumbled about in his satchel for his pen and leather notebook.

"He's in Auschwitz, the Polish concentration camp, some time in nineteen forty-two," China declared.

The messenger's eyes widened as he glared at China.

"Ah! ... An inmate I take it?" the messenger quizzed, as he handed the pen and notebook to China.

"Yes," replied China. "Will that be a problem?"

"No, it's no problem at all. It's just not a very pleasant place to visit, but I'll see that he gets your message."

China began to scribble her message down in a rather hasty fashion, conscious of the ongoing suffering that her brother must have been enduring. Although they were hundreds of years apart from one another and even though Maddox was interned in one of history's most lethal prisoner of war camps, China held onto the hope that she would find a way to return her brother safely back to their own time.

"How long will it take you to return with my brother's reply?" China asked earnestly.

"I'll be back within the hour," the messenger answered confidently, lighting a match for the cigarette that hung from his lips.

He pulled on his cigarette with a look of bliss across his face, as he pulled a small, brown envelope out of his satchel and handed it over to China. He continued to savour the cigarette as he watched China tear her message out of the notebook. She folded it and placed it in the envelope, which she marked with her brother's name.

The burning stench from the messenger's cigarette remained in the carriage long after he had left. The rain began to ease off as Eric watched him casually stroll through the other-worldly street towards a telepod. He gazed intensely as the messenger sauntered into the pod and instantly faded into nothingness. Eric gasped in astonishment, before sitting back in his seat to take stock of the completely alien situation he now found himself in. China also sat back in the seat and sighed deeply with impatience.

It would have been a long time to sit idle in the carriage, waiting for the messenger's return, if it hadn't been for the next unexpected turn of events. The last thing China had expected to happen was to serve as target practice for an enormous hybrid warcraft that hovered noiselessly in the air above the city centre.

Both Eric and China sat inside the carriage, completely oblivious to the danger that loomed above them, hidden amongst the dark depths of the moody clouds. The carriage rattled violently as one of the front wheels was blown off. The ear-shattering noise of the explosion vibrated right through Eric and China, as the blast threw them forward onto the floor of the carriage. They were tossed about like dice, the hands of fate having no regard for the outcome. A second blast immediately followed. One of the doors had been ripped completely off, leaving behind a deep crater in the ground, directly beside the carriage. It was large enough for the carriage to fall right through, should a third blast have tipped them over. The door on the opposite side of the carriage was miraculously still intact. China busted out of the door and held her breath for a moment as she turned her gaze to the heavens. The two massive, airborne crafts, which had broken free from the clouds, were laying siege upon the city below. Build-

ings crumbled like sandcastles while bricks and mortar were reduced to dust particles; and yet no bombs had been dropped and no missiles had been launched. The war-crafts seemed to be capable of unleashing destruction through some mysterious and powerful force unknown to China. With each explosion that ripped through the streets below, the crafts began to glow brightly. She continued to watch as the crafts moved slowly through the air, carefully selecting their targets. The crafts were meticulous in their movements, and yet there was no sound of engines.

Despite the destruction and chaos that ripped through the streets, people didn't react in a panicked manner. China watched as civilians calmly walked on through the rubble and debris; passing no heed on the casualties and fatalities that littered the roadside. No one stopped to assist those who were injured. People coldly stepped across the bodies of those who lay dead on the roadside. Eric was more alarmed by the unnaturally calm and composed manner of the civilians as they casually meandered on through the street. Despite the chaos and destruction that surrounded them, people seemed to be oblivious to the fact that the Grim Reaper loomed overhead, armed with his sickle, ready and willing to cut them down like shafts of wheat.

China and Eric were the only souls to scurry hastily through the war-torn streets, seeking a safe haven. It was an eerie experience for Eric to realise how removed from reality the civilians around him appeared to be. Everyone seemed to be in a state of total indifference, each engrossed in their own thoughts, lost in their own worlds. The future of humanity had changed for the worse. People walked the streets in a trance-like state, as if the life had been drained from their bones. They stared straight ahead with their eyes glazed over, as if they were possessed.

Eric held onto China by the arm as they hurried through the slow stream of civilians wandering aimlessly along in their half-human, half-zombie state. Explosions continued to tear up the streets and buildings throughout the city. Relief began to wash

over Eric, as they came to an abandoned underground railway on the next block.

The darkness grew as they descended the steps into the empty shell of the disused subway. The brickwork along the tunnel walls gave China the impression that the subway was several hundred years old. She found it strange that there were no other civilians taking shelter from the attacks on the streets above their heads. It felt abnormal to find themselves completely alone. The further along the tunnel they walked, the gloomier the atmosphere became. The only source of light ahead of them was coming from an antique, paraffin oil lamp resting in the centre of a small wooden table. The oil lamp reminded China of similar types her grandfather used to sell in his workshop. It made absolutely no sense to her that such an old-fashioned lamp should be lit up in the middle of an empty subway. Even Eric was immediately suspicious and urged China to come to a standstill. As they stood on the platform, they gazed at the flickering flame, which glowed like a beacon in the darkness of the cavern. Struggling to make sense of the situation, they continued to stare into the darkness and were suddenly startled to spot movement in the shadows. They could just about make out the shape of what appeared to be a small child, sitting on a stool beyond the wooden table. China was totally intrigued by the situation and suggested to Eric that they had little choice but to approach the child, who seemed to be all alone in the darkness. Eric was reluctant to walk towards the table and cautiously followed her lead.

As they drew nearer, China was surprised to discover a young girl with long, dark plaited hair, aged about twelve, sitting calmly on the stool with a book resting on her lap. She was dressed from head to toe in a long, flowing dress made of cream-coloured lace. She smiled at them both as they ventured nearer to her, which made Eric feel even more uncomfortable.

"Do you speak English?" China enquired, presuming that the girl was of Russian descent.

The girl didn't reply to China's question, but instead stood up

and placed the book she had been holding on the table beside the oil lamp. Both Eric and China looked at each other in mutual confusion.

"She doesn't speak English; just our luck!" Eric stated, half-laughing in a nervous manner.

China became somewhat uneasy as the girl walked towards them, holding her hands outstretched. Before Eric or China could react, the young girl took a hold of them both by the hand. As the three of them stood holding hands, the flickering flame from the oil lamp threw sinister shadows on the cold, dark walls of the tunnel. China and Eric watched, wide eyed, as the girl's smile was replaced with a more serious expression. She closed her eyes as if deep in concentration.

"What on earth is she trying to do?" Eric quizzed, looking to China for an answer she couldn't give him. The thundering roar of warfare could still be heard rocking through the city above them as they waited for the girl to give them some indication of what she wished to communicate to them.

The ground beneath their feet began to shake dramatically as an explosion ripped through the street above their heads. They continued to watch the expression on the young girl's face, as her closed eyes clenched tighter with concentration.

"My God! Do you hear that?" exclaimed Eric excitedly, turning to China for her reaction.

"Can you hear her speaking in your head, China? Can you hear it?" he continued, almost frantic with exhilaration.

"I hear it too," replied China, smiling warmly at Eric.

The girl's grip tightened and their hands tingled as they listened to her thoughts within their minds. Her voice was gentle and sweet as she spoke.

"You have come to the end of the line. You must choose your path wisely."

Eric's brow wrinkled with confusion as he watched China's face for her reaction. China didn't notice Eric's baffled expression as

she stared hard at the young girl, listening intensely to her bizarre message.

"If you choose to continue your journey down the track, you shall pass the point of no return."

Although they had no idea what her message meant, Eric and China were both of the impression that she was attempting to warn them of some impending disaster.

The palms of their hands began to grow hotter as the girl's thoughts continued to invade their minds.

"You have been given this book as a gift. It will serve to guide you on your journey."

Looking at the thick, leather-bound book lying on the table, China noticed how it suddenly appeared to glow. The girl continued to impart her advice.

"You must use this gift wisely. There are many chapters that have yet to be written, but remember that for each chapter you choose to alter, you must bear the consequences."

It was obvious that they were being given a warning, but what exactly they were being warned about wasn't so apparent.

Letting go of their hands, the girl opened her eyes. Once again, she began to smile, before lifting the book from the table and placing it in China's arms. She stared into China's eyes and spoke out loud, giving one last piece of advice.

"Those who choose to alter their history are forever destined to repeat it."

The little girl's words made absolutely no sense to Eric and so he began to show his frustration by shaking his head from side to side. Although she wasn't sure of the significance of the advice, China was taking the situation far more seriously than Eric.

"You said the book was a gift," China spoke. "A gift from whom? What do you mean when you say that it will guide me on my journey? Guide me on a journey to where?"

China was eager to find out as much as she could from the peculiar young girl.

China and Eric remained silent, waiting for the girl to respond

to China's questions, but she was unwilling to impart any further information. Eric approached the girl and leaned down in a squat so that his eyes were level with hers. The tone of his voice was gentle as he spoke in his thick Liverpool accent.

"We could really do with a little more information to go on. Do you think you could tell us anything else that could help us make sense of all of this?"

The girl continued to stare blankly at Eric, neither smiling nor frowning. Eric was really beginning to lose his patience with her.

"It would be polite to respond to our questions, young lady," commented Eric as he leaned even closer to the girl, waving a hand in front of her face to determine whether she was actually in a trance.

The girl didn't respond to Eric's gesture, but instead continued to stare blankly into his eyes.

"I give up, China," remarked Eric. "The lights are on but no one's home."

As soon as Eric had finished his sentence, the girl's eyes began to roll in her head, so that the pupils had completely disappeared and all that remained visible were the whites of her eyes. It was a frightening sight to observe, yet not half as sinister as the sight of her eyes turning blood-red as they began to glow brightly in the darkness. Eric quickly leapt up onto his feet, stumbling backwards at the hideous display.

"Like I said," Eric added, "the lights are on ..."

"I don't think she wishes to be questioned any further," stated China, with a look of concern spread across her face.

Things started to get a great deal more sinister when the girl began to levitate. Eric was completely flabbergasted by the sight, while China could do nothing but stare in disbelief.

"I'm not exactly sure that we can trust this little girl," Eric commented. "I mean how many little girls do you know that like to hang out alone in a dark, abandoned subway talking nonsense and flying about like a cuckoo."

China didn't humour Eric with a response.

"I don't know about you," Eric spoke as he looked in China's direction, "but I for one am very curious to know what it is at the end of that tunnel that she's so keen for us not to see."

As soon as Eric had spoken the words, he marched right past the levitating girl, pushing against the wooden table on his way towards the forbidden end of the tunnel.

"Don't do it, Eric!" cried China. "Don't walk any further! You heard what she said! You'll end up past the point of no return. Please come back, Eric! Please!"

Eric brazenly continued to file down the line, completely unfazed by the little girl's warning.

"Well, we've already experienced a young girl who's past the point of madness," Eric hollered back to China. "What harm could it be to pass the point of no return? I mean, who would want to return to this place anyhow?"

China thought it best to take the girl's advice and steer clear of trouble. Eric, however, was determined to carry on down the line, his curiosity growing with each step that he took.

The mood in the dimly lit subway became somewhat darker for China when the young girl began to speak once more. The sound of the girl's voice had changed so horribly that China intuitively took a few nervous steps backwards to keep her distance. Although the girl was clearly addressing Eric, China suddenly felt uncomfortable to be standing so close to the strange entity. The girl was clearly angry with Eric for refusing to heed her warning. Her voice was rough and manly as she spoke.

"You will suffer the consequences should you choose to continue beyond the point of no return." The girl's voice sounded almost demonic, causing China to drop the book on the ground and take to a fit of frenzied running. China had knocked over the table in her haste, smashing the oil lamp on the ground as she ran down the line towards Eric.

"Don't leave me here, Eric!" China screamed. "Wait for me, Eric! Wait for me!" China's legs almost buckled under her before she darted away from the strange little girl as quickly as was physi-

cally possible. Turning around, Eric realised how distressed China was and began to sprint back towards her. Grabbing hold of China by the hand, Eric ran back down the line in the forbidden direction, as far away from the girl as they could possibly get. Neither of them dared to look back, but continued to run frantically, panting with breathlessness.

The tunnel appeared to be never-ending, as they ran further and further into the darkness. Losing her breath, China began to wonder how much longer they would have to run. She was almost out of breath when she spotted a bright light up ahead. As they drew nearer the light, they realised that it was in fact coming from an antique oil lamp sitting on a wooden table, identical to the one they had seen earlier near the entrance of the subway. They both stopped dead in their tracks, staring at the flickering wick from the lamp. China wondered if it might have been the same lamp that she had smashed when she knocked the table to the ground just moments before. A shadow fell across the table as China caught a glimpse of something moving in the darkness behind the oil lamp. It was the same little girl they had just run away from, with long, dark plaited hair and a long, flowing dress made of cream-coloured lace. China almost jumped out of her skin with fright at the sight of the girl. Eric was lost for words. The girl had her feet firmly on the ground this time and her eyes looked human once more. She was smiling sweetly at China as she held the leather-bound book in her arms.

"I don't understand," China spoke, as she turned her gaze from the girl to Eric. "How could she possibly be here?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," replied Eric, not taking his eyes off the girl as she stood silently smiling, boring her eyes into China. "I don't know about you, China, but this girl is beginning to give me the creeps," Eric remarked, not quite knowing what to expect next.

"So, do we keep on running past her or do we turn back?" China questioned, her throat becoming dry with anxiety.

Unsure of what to do for the best, Eric was slow with his

response. "I don't know, China, but I'm guessing we won't get much further down the line before we come across her again. There's probably not much point in going any further. I reckon we should just take the damn book and head back the way we came. What do you think?"

Before China had the chance to respond to Eric, the girl placed the book in China's arms once more and began to address them. Much to China's relief, the girl's tone of voice had returned to its regular pitch, a far more natural sound than the manly, demonic voice that had caused China to scurry frantically down the line towards Eric.

"You must accept this gift, for it is the only means you have of progressing to your next destination," the girl informed them in a rather cold and indifferent manner. "You have reached platform thirteen and have now passed the point of no return. You are not permitted to travel any further and it is no longer possible to go back the way you came."

China and Eric glanced at each other with bewilderment, before looking up at the sign above the platform. Eric read it aloud.

PLATFORM THIRTEEN

"Thirteen," he commented casually. "Unlucky for some."



CHAPTER 14
WHITE KNIGHTS, DARK DAYS



China had only just glanced at the book in her arms for a moment, before looking back up to realise that the girl had vanished into thin air. All that remained was the stool, the table and the flickering oil lamp. Eric was in a state of awe after their strange encounter. China moved closer to the edge of the table and placed the book upon it so that she could open it in a bid to make sense of the perplexing message that they had just received. Eric stood close to China, looking over her shoulder with anticipation, almost holding his breath, waiting to discover the book's secrets. They both gasped simultaneously as she flicked through its crinkled pages.

"They're all blank pages," declared Eric in a confused tone. "Every single page is blank. What's the point of that?" Eric's frustration was evident from the puzzled expression on his face. China was just as baffled and sat down upon the stool so that she might give their situation some considerable thought. Eric drew her attention to the fact that the sound of explosions could no longer be heard from the street above ground level. There was an eerie silence creeping in around them as they both stared pensively at the peculiar book upon the table. The deafening

silence was broken by the unexpected sound of footsteps coming towards them from further up the line, beyond the point of no return. It was too dark to make out who was approaching them. The slow pace led China to believe that it was a man walking towards them. Eventually, Eric could make out the silhouette of a tall man with a satchel slung over one shoulder and a cigarette in his hand.

"It's him! It's the messenger!" stated Eric. "He'll have a message from your brother," he continued, placing a comforting hand upon China's shoulder. They stood and watched eagerly, as the dark shape drew nearer and nearer. The light from the oil lamp confirmed that it was the messenger approaching them, his distinct features illuminated in the bright glow of the lamplight.

"Did my brother receive my message? Do you have a message for me?" China asked impatiently, not waiting for the answer to her first question.

"Yes, your brother got your message and yes, I have a message for you," the messenger replied, flicking the butt of his cigarette on the ground and stamping it out with his boot. China turned to Eric, positively beaming with a grin, while he squeezed her shoulder in response. The messenger began to root through his satchel for the envelope marked with China's name and began to tell her what she didn't want to hear.

"I'm afraid the message is not from your brother. He had no desire to make any contact with you."

China's expression quickly soured as she shook her head from side to side in disbelief. "No! No ... it can't be! ... But why?" China's demeanour was more solemn as she spoke.

"He gave no reason for his decision," the messenger replied. "He just stared coldly ahead, not making any eye contact, and tore your message up into small pieces."

China's eyes began to well up with tears. Eric pulled her into his arms, hugging her tightly.

"His eyes were so very dark and cold," the messenger said as he continued to shed light on the issue. "Looking into his eyes was

like looking into a bottomless pit, as if his soul was lost in a great abyss.”

China did her best to hold back her tears and compose herself, before opening the envelope the messenger had given her. Although the message was short, it took her a moment to react as she proceeded to re-read it over and over again, with a look of genuine confusion spread across her face. Having asked several times what the message was and having received no response, Eric could wait no more and snatched the note from China’s hand, before reading it aloud.

*China,
Please come at your earliest convenience.
Use the book to guide you.
Regards,
Nikola Tesla*

Not only had the message made little sense to China, it meant absolutely nothing to Eric, who had no idea who Nikola Tesla was. China’s mind wandered back to the weird encounter she had with Dr Rickman and the Ouija board in the trenches. She began to recall the message she had received from Tesla, stating that he was with her brother. Putting all the pieces of the puzzle together, China realised that it must have been Tesla who sent her the book. The girl who had delivered it to her had mentioned that it was a gift and now Tesla was informing her that she ought to use it to somehow guide her to him.

“Who’s Nikola Tesla?” enquired Eric, as he stared intensely at the quirky, looped handwriting on the note.

Conscious of the tone of urgency in the message, China very briefly explained that he was the inventor that had discovered time travel in the twentieth century. There was no time for a more detailed account than that.

“What do you think Tesla wants with you?” questioned Eric, looking at China with concern.

"Your guess is as good as mine," she replied, as she took the note back from Eric and folded it, before placing it in the pocket of her overcoat. "If Tesla really is with Maddox, I'll finally find my brother. What we've got to figure out is how to use the book to guide us to him," China announced and with that, she lifted the book from the table.

The messenger hurriedly made his excuses to get away and continued back down the track beyond the point of no return, merging back into the shadows. When the sound of the messenger's footsteps could no longer be heard down the line, the silence seemed to swoop in from the shadows. The silence surrounded them as if they were being stalked by it.

Opening the book again, China immediately noticed a handwritten note on the inside cover. She was stunned to discover the note, as she was certain that it wasn't there when she had first opened the book. She read it out loud for Eric to hear:

*If traveling forward in time,
flick to the end of the book.*

*To travel back in time,
go to the beginning of the book.*

Just to be sure that there were no other hidden messages contained in the book, China swiftly flicked through the pages, confirming that the rest of them were definitely all blank. The idea that a book could transport a person from one place in time to another was just about the most ridiculous notion that Eric had ever heard. China, on the other hand, had no trouble believing the concept. She had experienced so many zany events in her short life that she truly believed that anything was possible.

"There's no time like the present," China joked. "It's time we moved on," she added, as she opened the book at the very first page, not knowing what to expect. Although she had been given

no other instructions to follow, she intuitively knew that the book would somehow work its magic.

Eric held onto China with both hands on her shoulders, as she stared fixedly at the blank page before her. She shut her eyes as her mind focused on her desired destination. Feeling a gentle breeze upon her cheek, she suddenly opened her eyes and was stunned to see that a thick mist with a greenish-grey hue was beginning to swirl about them. Glancing down at the open pages of the book, she was even more amazed to see that her thoughts were somehow being projected onto the paper in what appeared to be her own handwriting. Eric was completely mystified by the sight as the letters on the page slowly spelled out the word she had imagined:

Auschwitz

Although their feet seemed to remain on solid ground, they both felt lightheaded as the mist began to swirl rapidly about them. Within a matter of seconds, there was a blinding flash of light before mist began to slowly disperse. A cool wind began to blow against their skin as golden-brown leaves began to dance and twirl on the crest of the breeze. China snapped the book shut and put it into her satchel. Eric stared with his mouth open at the foreign words of the metal inscription, which hung above the gates in front of them.

ARBEIT MACHT FREI

Looking up at the harrowing German message above the intimidating, wrought-iron gates, China instantly knew where she was. Eric had lived and died long before the Second World War and had never heard of the notorious concentration camp. Despite China's translation, Eric had no appreciation for the irony of the message: Work sets you free.

"Here we are, Eric." China's pitch was low with dread. "We have arrived at Auschwitz. You are standing at the gates of hell."

They both remained silent, waiting for their presence to be discovered.

China instantly thought it peculiar that they were surrounded by utter silence. Not a sound could be heard emanating from the camp, not even the sorrowful shrill of a lonely bird. The next thing that struck her as odd was the lack of prison guards or inmates. Not a single soul could be seen through the bars of the gates. There was no sign of life whatsoever. On closer inspection, China took notice of how dilapidated and worn the entrance gates appeared to be. The barrack buildings and outhouses were positively derelict, in comparison to images that she had seen during her time, when the camp was operating as a museum.

"We're definitely at the right place," remarked China with a baffled look on her face. "but I'm guessing we're not in the right time."

Thinking back to the handwriting etched onto the page of the book, China realised that she had only thought of the place she wished to travel to. She had failed to give any thought to the actual moment in time.

The gates to the camp were locked and rusted. Taking stock of her surroundings, China could see that there was no way of entering the camp. She held onto the gates with a firm grip and pushed her face close to the bars, pressing her cheeks against the rusted metal to peer as far as she could. The branches of the tall birch trees were gnarled and twisted, bushes and weeds had become overgrown and the plaster crumbled from the buildings nearby. She could see the remains of the barbed wire fence and sighed despondently as she imagined the horrors that had been unleashed upon humanity in this lonely and foreboding corner of the world. China shut her eyes tightly in despair, sending out her sympathetic thoughts into the ether. The breeze suddenly began to pick up with force. Crisp, tan-coloured leaves began to swirl about the gates as China held onto the bars. Hearing her name called in the wind, she quickly opened her eyes. As she looked around, hoping to discover its source, she could see that the camp

was clearly empty. Not a single soul was to be seen within its confinement. But she heard her name again, several times in a row, through the whistling of the wind. It was most definitely coming from the direction of the camp and seemed to grow louder each time. Eric could hear it too and drew nearer to China, gripping her by the shoulders from behind. Other sounds carried along in the wind: the ghastly shouts of the German prison guards; the moans and cries of tortured souls and the distinct sound of marching to the military music of a brass band. There was plenty to hear, but nothing to see, except for the derelict and abandoned grounds of the camp.

“China, it’s me ... Tesla. Can you hear me?” a voice called out clearly from the swirling leaves in front of her on the inside of the gates.

“Yes, I can hear you. Where are you?” China called out in response, as Eric tightened his grip on her shoulders.

At first there was no reply. Both China and Eric were awestruck to watch the outline of a human form slowly emerge from the air and swirling leaves before them. Tesla’s outline was faint, yet just bold enough to be seen by the naked eye. His features were hazy and his legs from the knees down were invisible. A subtle, white glow emanated from his outline. He was a thin man who appeared to be in his mid-eighties. His face was gaunt, with a grey moustache to match the grey stubble on his head, from where he had been shaved. He wore the notorious white- and blue-striped prisoner’s uniform.

China was beside herself with astonishment to be face-to-face with the man she had come to idolise: one of the most famous scientists and inventors of the twentieth century and the esteemed inventor of time travel. She was both speechless and spellbound for a moment as she stared at the figure before her, unable to think of anything to say.

“I am sure you are wondering why I have summoned you here, China.” Although he spoke with a strong Serbian accent, Tesla’s English was excellent. China’s eyes widened as she listened eagerly

for the explanation. "You cannot imagine the misery I or others have endured, trapped within this prison camp for centuries. Even death is no escape from the horrors of Auschwitz. Our souls have become trapped within the very ether of the place, destined to dwell in a perpetual state of misery. I have waited so long for you to come to our aid." Tesla's eyes glistened with woe as he held China's gaze without blinking.

"But what can I possibly do to help you?" China questioned with a deep sense of confusion clouding her mind. She had no idea whatsoever how she of all people could be of any assistance to a genius like Tesla.

"You must have realised by now that the world and all that exists within it is not at all how it appears to be. Man has abused the gift of time travel, causing rips in time and space. It is no longer safe to travel forwards or backwards in time." Tesla didn't shift his gaze once from China as he spoke. China was still at a loss as to what she could do to help. Tesla continued to enlighten her. "To put it simply, China, there are two issues of concern at large. The first problem man faces is the fact that souls are becoming trapped outside of time. There are so many rips in time and space that most time travellers are falling through the cracks beyond the realms of time itself. Souls are becoming trapped for all eternity on a daily basis, unable to return to their own time. Some unfortunate souls are being transported to the wrong place at the wrong time, becoming infused in solid objects and other living creatures."

China's thoughts immediately flashed back to the images of the men and women she had seen embedded in walls, trees and other people. She winced at the gruesome memories.

Tesla continued to speak. "The second dilemma we face is the matter of a perpetual war, a never-ending massacre of humanity, a war in which death offers no release from the misery and suffering. It is the deadliest of all wars, a war against the mightiest of all foes, a war against time itself."

Eric's mouth dropped open at the mention of a war against

time. He stared silently in disbelief, waiting for Tesla to further explain.

"People are being drafted into a constant state of war, enduring an everlasting struggle to survive. Their souls are unable to rest or move on as their tormented lives and painful deaths are destined to be repeated over and over again. Every battle and war, both past and future, has become entwined in the ether outside of time, destined to fight one another in one never-ending, meaningless war. Soldiers from every battle in history fight against soldiers from future battles that have not yet occurred. Occasionally, due to the frequent occurrence of time slips, soldiers have no idea who they are fighting against or even why they are fighting. There are no specific sides to this war; it is ultimately every man for himself."

China turned to look at Eric with a stunned expression on her face, clearly overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation. Tesla went on to give China more detail.

"Of course, it's not just soldiers being dragged into the war; an alarming number of innocent civilians are being abducted from every point in time. Those who are behind the sordid operation refer to themselves as the War Office. They have seized an opportunity from the breakdown in the space-time continuum and gained financially from the conniving orchestration of a futile war."

"The White Knights," interrupted China. "I've had an unlucky encounter with them myself, not so long ago." China was staring hard at the ground, her mind troubled by the flashback to the moment she had been shot in the forest. "What kind of people perform such atrocities?" she questioned with a sullen expression on her face.

"People?" Tesla quipped. "You honestly believe these are real people? They may appear to look like people, but they are far from human."

China listened intently as Tesla continued.

"These people have been so deeply traumatised at some point or time in their lives that they forgot what it was to be

human. The War Office or White Knights have been known to brainwash fresh recruits and replace their internal limbs and organs with mechanical parts. Half-machine and half-man, they scour the world to the ends of the earth, preying upon the weak and vulnerable. Countless children that go missing around the world each day are being abducted and forcefully drafted into the conflict. They even went to the trouble to orchestrate a bogus war in the name of time travel to lure people into conscription."

Tesla paused for a moment before he dropped the killer blow.

"The more souls that become trapped outside of time in this perpetual war, the more of a chance there is that the rip in space and time will widen, causing the universe to collapse under its own weight."

China was beginning to feel weighed down by the volume of information that Tesla had burdened her with. She was even more troubled to think that she couldn't possibly help in any way and remained silent for a moment, as she attempted to gather her thoughts. Tesla came forward a little closer to the gate before requesting her assistance.

"You are the only one, China, who could ever save the universe from collapsing in on itself. Under the circumstances, I am not in the position to resolve the situation, but if you are willing, China, I could guide you so that you could endeavour to save humanity from a fate much worse than death."

China was utterly intrigued by the fact that Tesla was calling upon her to help save the universe! She was bewildered about what had led him to believe that she had the power to tackle such a mind-boggling quandary. Saving the entire universe wasn't on China's bucket list before being forced to meet her maker.

"Although I am willing to help in any way I can, I really don't understand how exactly I can assist you," China commented, looking over her shoulder to Eric for support. Eric's expression was one of worry; his brow wrinkled with anxiety at the thought of what China was being asked to take on. Tesla's eyes locked with

China's as he imparted his humble plan to restore order in the great cosmos.

"I need you to travel back in time, China," he boldly stated.

China's eyebrows raised ever so slightly with bemusement as he continued.

"I need you to return to my past and make some adjustments to my life in nineteen seventeen. You must assist my younger self to adjust the blueprints for the world's first ever time machine. I have chosen you for this task, China, because of your invaluable education in electromagnetic engineering and quantum mechanics. More importantly, I have chosen you because you possess an electric soul."

China was knocked for six by Tesla's faith in her abilities. Tesla continued to speak with his Serbian twang.

"I could have chosen your grandfather for this task, but unlike you, he does not possess the ability to physically travel outside the realms of time and back. His soul, just like every other soul that ever existed, is not made of the stuff that allows the laws of quantum physics to be manipulated. Your soul, however, is the only soul to consist of pure electricity, allowing you to travel freely outside the realms of time and back."

China was bowled over by the thought of going back in time to interfere with the creation of the time machine. Eric, on the other hand, was utterly confused by the use of terms such as quantum mechanics and quantum physics. Tesla's statements had completely washed over Eric's head as he was still struggling to come to terms with the fact that time travel actually existed. Tesla felt compelled to further explain China's unique ability to cross between worlds.

"Most souls who choose to travel between worlds are physically prevented from doing so by the veil that separates them in time and space. The only alternative is to travel by means of astral projection, as a ghostlike visitor to another time and place, for want of a better explanation. That explains many hauntings and incidents of poltergeist activity throughout history that have terrified so many people. Due to the increase of souls trapped in the

war outside of time, cases of paranormal disturbance are at an all-time high. It's impossible for souls outside of time to cross over into the light; to dwell there, one ceases to exist. You, however, China, are made of sturdier stuff. Your very essence is the substance of stars; you have the ability to tread effortlessly through the great mists of time. The timeless void we find ourselves ensnared within cannot imprison you. Your energy flows freely. You truly have a gift."

China could hardly take it all in. Although had been aware that she was different from a young age, she had never imagined that she possessed any extraordinary gifts. It was a shock to be informed that she was the only individual who had acquired the power to bend the laws of physics to her will. She was truly flabbergasted by Tesla's revelation.

The bustling sounds of life from the camp continued to hang in the air and yet no activity could be seen with the naked eye. Alarmed by the aggressive roars of a Nazi prison guard and the deafening sound of machine-gun fire, which carried along in the breeze from another time, China's thoughts immediately turned to the welfare of her brother.

"The message from the Ouija board said that you were with my brother, Maddox. Can you tell me how he is?" China enquired, eager to learn how he was coping.

Tesla sighed deeply before making his reply. "I did spend some time getting to know your brother while he was an inmate during the Second World War, but that was a long time ago and so much has come to pass since then."

"While he was an inmate," repeated China. "Does that mean that he managed to escape? Is he no longer a prisoner here?" She gripped the bars of the gates even tighter with anticipation.

Tesla deliberately broke eye contact with her, not wanting to see the disappointment on her face as he broke the news. "No, he is no longer a prisoner here. He ... he has long since moved on. You would be better off to forget about him, China. He is not the man he used to be."

A wave of dread began to churn in the pit of China's stomach before she spoke.

"I don't understand. What do you mean I would be better off to forget about him? Why isn't he the man he used to be? Where's my brother? What happened to him?" China's voice began to quiver. She was frantic with worry, imagining all sorts of horrifying outcomes.

"Let me just say that your brother's loyalties have changed a great deal from when I first met him," Tesla responded, aware that he could no longer hold back. He was now obligated to give China a full explanation. He looked directly into China's face as he delivered the bad news. "Maddox left Auschwitz in January of nineteen forty-five. He had become quite withdrawn in the winter of forty-four, which is not surprising after the number of beatings he took when Himmler was informed of his participation in an attempted escape. He had spent a whole month in solitary confinement, practically bricked up behind a wall. I think it is important to mention how much he suffered before he made his decision to join forces with the dark side."

China moved a hand across her face, covering her mouth with shock. Eric gently stroked her hair and remained silent, allowing Tesla to pause a moment before adding more detail.

"The War Office made several visits to Maddox the week before he left. They had no problem gaining access into the camp. They simply materialised, literally coming out of the woodwork. They were protected from the hazard of German bullets through their clever use of astral projection. It wasn't the first time they had whispered dark words into Maddox's ear. I was with him just after their first recruitment attempt back in nineteen forty-two. I watched as he tore up your message. There was a notable change in Maddox after that first encounter with the War Office. The day he left, he made no attempt to discuss his reasons for joining the War Office."

China was even more desperate than ever to find her brother, with the hope that she could persuade him to quit his post with

the War Office. She had both hands up to her face, covering her cheeks as she spoke.

"Perhaps if I could just speak to him ... maybe I could win him over. Where is he now? How can I reach him?"

Tesla was harsh with his reply. "I don't think you realise the graveness of the situation, China. It's far too dangerous to make contact with him ever again. It would be for the best if you let him go."

Being a member of the War Office wasn't reason enough for China to give up searching for her brother. She accepted that the war had changed him, but she refused to believe that he would turn his back on his own flesh and blood.

"I need to see him," China demanded. "If only I could see him." She was almost pleading with Tesla for his help as she turned to face Eric with tears in her eyes.

Tesla seemed to step back from the gate, distancing himself from China and Eric. He held up what appeared to be a large, transparent crystal ball in the palm of his hands. Tesla sighed before he spoke.

"As you wish, but I do not think that you will like what you see."

China watched with wonder as the crystal sphere began to spin rapidly within Tesla's hands. It began to glow, before clouding over so that it was no longer transparent. Eric could hardly believe what he was seeing, as the clouds quickly dispersed, giving way to electrically charged particles that forked through the crystal like tiny lightning bolts. It seemed for all the world that there was a thunder storm taking place within the crystal ball. When the lightning bolts began the fade, a clear image of a busy office began to emerge. China watched as the clerks were faffing about. Dressed in their impeccably clean, white uniforms, the clerks at the headquarters of the War Office were oblivious to the fact that they were being watched. Then China saw Maddox as he searched through a number of files. She had thought that he looked smart in his white uniform. If it wasn't for the corrupt powers he represented, she

would almost have been proud of her brother. She turned and smiled at Eric before returning her gaze to Maddox.

"Take a closer look," Tesla insisted, as the image of her brother became the main focus. He was leaning over a co-worker's desk with a file in his hand. Only one side of his face was visible.

"Keep watching," Tesla instructed, as the crystal ball continued to focus on Maddox.

China could see him from the side of his desk. He had no idea that he was being watched and continued with his work, regardless. When he stood up and turned to walk away from the desk, he was facing China's view. She shrieked with shock when she saw the other side of his face. It looked as if he had received an injury to his face. The skin had peeled right back from the socket of his left cheek, right down to the start of his jawline. It was a large, unsightly gash, which hadn't healed as it should. His facial structure was exposed. China was horrified to see that there was a gleaming metal frame where his cheekbones should have been visible.

"It's hideous!" cried China, turning her back on the image and burying her head in Eric's comforting embrace. "I can't stand to see him like that," she added. "He doesn't look human anymore."

Eric, unlike China, couldn't peel his eyes away from the freakish spectacle. It seemed as if Maddox was part-human and part-robot. China was horrified to see the metal skull underneath the flesh of his face, which made her wonder how much of her brother was mechanical and how much was actually human. Although she herself had bionic implants, she always considered herself to be entirely human. To contemplate a world in which humans were transformed into machines was a truly terrifying notion for her.

Seeing how upset China had become, Tesla hid the crystal ball from view. He was beginning to fade away even more, as he was drained from having to expel so much energy to power the crystal ball.

"You haven't even seen the worst part," Tesla remarked.

"Your brother was about to give an order to attack the city of Liverpool, with the intention of wiping it from the map of England. He would have known from intelligence reports that the attack was scheduled to occur at a time when his own grandfather resided there. He is still bitter about the fact that he missed out on the life he once knew before getting caught up in the war."

Tesla was now just barely visible and could only be seen from the waist upwards.

"What happened to my grandfather? Did he survive the attacks?" China hollered, shaking with anxiety.

"Your grandfather is alive and well. Luckily, the attacks were called off by someone more senior in authority to your brother," Tesla revealed, much to the China's relief. It was difficult for her to believe that her own brother had turned his back on humanity and had become her arch enemy. Tearing up her message was bad enough, but China struggled to come to terms with the fact that Maddox was responsible for initiating an attack on the very city where his own grandfather resided.

Eric held China tightly as she continued to shake her head in disbelief.

Despite China's turmoil, Tesla felt obligated to share a few home truths about her brother.

"I trusted your brother too much with information that was classified. I realise now that I should have taken my secrets with me to the grave, but I could never have guessed that he would have been recruited by the War Office. He betrayed me, before sharing the information with the authorities. I had already been interrogated by the War Office about my time travel projects on a number of occasions. Then, in January nineteen forty-three, shortly after your brother's appointment with the War Office, I was assassinated by two Nazi SS officers working in tandem with the US Government. They managed to steal blueprints for my most advanced time machine designs. By October of that year, only months after my death, the US Government carried out their

first time travel experiment: the notorious Philadelphia Experiment, which, as history tells us, went drastically wrong.”

China immediately recalled seeing the *USS Eldridge*: the American naval ship from the Second World War. The experiment conducted on board the ship had been the scene of utter carnage, as the contorted and mutilated bodies of men became embedded within solid objects.

China listened attentively as Tesla shared more of his story.

“After my death, I found it difficult to cross over. I knew that I had indirectly caused so much human hardship and suffering by allowing the science of time travel to fall into the wrong hands. The War Office, or the White Knights as they are better known, are simply puppets, controlled by their puppet master – the US Government. Prior to my incarceration at Auschwitz, I spent decades floating between worlds, trying in vain to right my wrongs and undo the harm I have caused. The White Knights captured me when I was at my most vulnerable; my soul had become weak and my spirit was broken. Time can be cruel when it does not flow how it should in a linear fashion. The years roll forwards and backwards, but mere moments drag on for an eternity.”

Eric didn’t quite know what to make of what he was hearing and remained silent throughout the conversation.

“There is so much more I have to tell you, China, but I’m afraid my time is running out,” Tesla declared as the power of his voice was beginning to wane.

“What is it that you need me to do?” China questioned earnestly, wanting to throw herself into her task. By now Tesla was beginning to fade fast. He was only visible from his shoulders upwards and his voice was growing weaker.

“You must use the book to take you back to New York in nineteen seventeen, the year I invented the time machine. I need you to help me make changes to the blueprints before the summer of nineteen eighteen, when my first official time travel experiment took place on Bold Street in Liverpool. You must work alongside my younger self, studying the mechanics of time travel, adjusting

the blueprints and making any necessary alterations to prevent rips in time and space. I just pray it will be enough to avert the Great Perpetual War."

Although Tesla's voice could still be heard, he could no longer be seen. All that China could see were the derelict buildings, barbed wire and overgrown greenery beyond the gates.

"But how will I do that?" China questioned with a hint of apprehension in her voice.

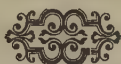
"You will figure it out," the reply came, carried along in the wind. "Send word with the messenger when you need to make contact with me."

"I really don't think I can do this," declared China, closing her eyes and hiding her face behind her cupped hands.

"I believe in you, China," replied Tesla, as his last breath wafted along upon the breeze. "The universe is depending on you to save us from our darkest days."



CHAPTER 15
DOUBLE JEOPARDY



Saying goodbye to Eric was one of the most distressing moments of China's life. She wished more than anything that she could take Eric with her, but his soul was firmly bound to the fabric of the timeless void. It was his unfortunate fate to linger indefinitely within the pit of a never-ending hell, caught up in raging battles wherever and whenever they happened to erupt. It broke Eric's heart as much as China's to part ways, knowing it was truly unlikely that they would ever lock eyes on one another again. It was difficult for China to leave her husband's side, not knowing how he would cope with the unfamiliar territory of a new-age, modern world. She knew that she couldn't abandon him outside the gates of a concentration camp so far into the future and so she thought long and hard about what to do for the best.

Eric was perfectly aware that no matter how far back or forward in time China could bring him, the hardship of another war would always be hot on his heels.

They eventually came to a mutual agreement that Eric should return to the start of his military career during World War I, to the quaint French tavern where they had first met. Despite being trapped within a timeless world, destined to repeat his experience

of the war over and over again, Eric felt at ease to return to a war in which he belonged. It made more sense to him to fight in familiar surroundings.

Standing in the doorway of the tavern, Eric held his wife's delicate frame so tightly against his body as he kissed her ardently, not wanting to ever let her go. China, almost crushed in Eric's embrace, became lost in his lips, wishing the moment could last forever. It tore her heart apart to realise that this could be the last time she would ever hold her husband in her arms.

Standing in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, New York on a summer afternoon in 1917 served to distract China from her desolate thoughts. The lobby was wide, spacious and luxuriantly decorated. The ceilings were positively dripping with chandeliers, while the gleam of polished silver ornaments and gold fittings caught China's eye, like a magpie bewitched by the sparkle of jewels. China was aware from Tesla's biographies that he spent a considerable number of years staying at the Waldorf Astoria. She thought it a rather extravagant choice of living quarters, especially in the midst of a war.

She sat back in a plush, brown, leather armchair that resembled a throne, as she watched the hustle and bustle of guests moving through the lobby. Some guests were checking out while others had just arrived, as their suitcases and trunks were being carted along by the bellboy. Guests sauntered along the lobby as if on parade, dressed in their best with top hats, fur coats and diamonds on display. As she observed other ladies decked out in their refinery, China was glad to feel appropriately dressed and felt privileged to be wearing a hand-me-down from Tsarina Alexandra of Russia.

The moment she spied Tesla striding through the lobby's entrance, China swiftly vaulted up onto her feet, gathering her silk skirts. He looked just as she had expected him to, smartly turned out in a pinstripe suit, a pocket watch chained to his waistcoat with a glint of sheer genius in his eyes. Although the grey streaks that glistened throughout his dark hair hinted at his age, he looked fresh for a sixty-one-year-old man. His intensely brilliant-blue eyes

had such a wise look of maturity, indicating that he was a man ahead of his time.

Ignoring the social etiquette of the day, China made a rather indecorous move by approaching the man whose acquaintance she was yet to meet. He did a double take when he realised that she was addressing him.

"Nikola Tesla, I believe?" China knowingly enquired as she held out a hand. "I don't believe we have met. Allow me to introduce myself. China Winter ... delighted to make your acquaintance."

Tesla shook her hand for longer than was necessary, bowled over by her boldness. Although Tesla had a reputation as a ladies' man, China could tell that he was unsure of her intentions. His mouth partially opened and yet he was unable to find any words. China leaned forward a little closer to him and began to whisper.

"To tell you the truth, we've met before, in another time."

Tesla's eyes widened as she emphasised the word 'time'.

"Is there a place more discreet than this where we can talk?" questioned China.

Tesla finally found his voice. "Of course ... right this way. Please, allow me to escort you." He took her by the hand and linked her arm, leading her out onto the street in the balmy summer air.

"I know a quaint little Irish bar down a back street, off the next block. It is a quiet place where we can talk." The Serbian-American's command of English was as good at this stage in his life as it would be in later years.

Almost every punter seated at the bar paused in mid-conversation to look around at the doorway as China and Tesla entered. China noticed that there was only one other woman present in the bar and she guessed by her attire that she was a working girl.

Tesla found a cosy snug and helped China to her seat before making his way to the bar to order drinks. The bar was dark and poky, just as China had expected it to be after seeing it from the outside. It smelled fusty, like a mix of stale beer and sawdust. Not wanting to appear rude, China sipped at the beverage that Tesla

had ordered for her and was pleasantly surprised to discover that it was an Irish Coffee.

Out of sight from the prying eyes at the bar counter, China felt relaxed enough to talk.

"I know everything about you. I have come back in time from the future to assist you in correcting a flaw in time travel ..."

China paused for a moment, contemplating how difficult it would be for Tesla to accept her claim. She realised how potty it sounded, to meet a time traveller before the time machine was even invented.

"I had always expected something remarkable like this to occur!" Tesla commented excitedly. He grinned widely at China, giving the appearance of a schoolboy. She could tell that Tesla was proud of his future achievement. He was already deeming it to be a huge success, because a time traveller had turned up long before the machine was due to be switched on for the first time.

"Don't you see what this means?" exclaimed Tesla. "It works! My experiment will be a success! You are proof of that!" he added, as he took a hold of China's hand and kissed it twice with delight in a rather eccentric manner. China was amazed by his reaction to her incredible claim. Tesla went on to point out how highly classified his plans were. As he hadn't shared his ideas for the project with a single soul, he was certain that her claims were genuine. He was sure that she couldn't possibly have known anything about his secretive work. Intrigued by the prospect that China had spent time in the company of his older self, Tesla inundated her with questions about the future.

China gave Tesla a brief summary of her reasons for being sent back in time to meet him. She was sure that he would be overwhelmed by the volume of information she had to impart, but the man coolly appeared to take it all in his stride.

"It does not surprise nor shock me to hear of so many wars and conflicts to take place in the future," remarked Tesla. "It greatly disturbs me to learn of the unfortunate souls trapped in a perpetual war. I do feel that I must have been somehow respon-

sible for the awful situation and I am more than willing to help resolve it in any way that I can.”

During the conversation, Tesla had remarked that the simple decision not to build the time machine in the first place wasn't a feasible option. China's presence and the existence of time travel meant that an entire web of universes already existed far into the future. To refrain from inventing the time machine at this stage would destroy many universes that existed as a consequence of time travel. It would disrupt the existing balance of nature, setting out a whole new set of circumstances that would have a ripple effect between many worlds. The consequences would be disastrous, preventing billions of souls from ever existing in the first place and wiping out entire galaxies. Tesla compared the knock-on effect of such an action to a butterfly flying into a storm. Tesla strongly believed that the invention of the time machine was humanity's destiny. Despite man's potential to abuse the power of time travel, Tesla maintained that the benefits it could bring to humanity outweighed the dangers.

Although it was an impertinent thing to do in those days, Tesla escorted China back to his hotel room, so that she would have shelter for the night. It was a perfectly innocent affair; China slept on the four-poster bed, while Tesla rested on the chaise lounge. The arrangement suited Tesla fine, as he wasn't a man who had time to waste on sleep. His mind continuously whirled, full to the brim with great scientific thoughts and continually bursting with ideas for new inventions. He would often stay up into the wee hours of the morning, working on plans for his latest invention, sometimes falling asleep on the chair with his head slumped across his desk. He often got by on two hours sleep per night and at times the maid would find that his bed hadn't been slept in, even though he spent the entire night in his room.

As soon as she woke up, China was momentarily startled to find herself tucked up in a strange bed. Sitting herself upright, she was surprised to realise that she was alone and took the opportunity to quickly put herself together. A knock came on the door,

leading her to believe that Tesla had returned. Opening the door, she was surprised to be greeted by a smartly dressed waiter.

"Room service, madam," the tall man called out as he wheeled the trolley into the room.

Tesla returned soon after and explained that although he wasn't usually in the habit of taking breakfast in the mornings, he had taken the liberty of ordering it on China's behalf. After pouring himself a cup of tea, Tesla carried a chair over to the open window and sat basking in the ray of warm sunshine, which cut across the room in a brilliant shaft of gleaming light. He sat quietly sipping on his tea, deep in thought as he took in the crisp morning air. The sounds of morning activity could be heard twenty floors down as the everyday hustle and bustle of street life seemed to amplify through the open window, with the fine lace curtain pulled to one side, allowing for a better view. The comforting aroma of freshly brewed coffee lingered in the room as China filled her cup. She took her coffee with her and walked towards the window to see what it was that held Tesla's attention as he sat quietly gazing at the bustling street below. China drew a deep breath, filling her lungs with as much of the crisp, clean, morning air as she could.

Looking down on the scene below, China thought that the citizens resembled a colony of ants, hurrying to and fro, walking along in clusters on the pavement. She watched as people clambered onto trams, while others scrambled across the busy road, avoiding the occasional vintage motor cars making their way slowly through the busy streets. A sea of dark clothed civilians moved along the pavement below, the majority of which were men and boys dressed formally in suits with shirts, waistcoats, caps and bowler hats. The women and girls were also in formal attire, wearing long, dark dresses sweeping along the ground, with their hair neatly pinned up under large, wide-brimmed hats. The clip-clop sound of horses' hooves echoed through the hotel room as a stagecoach casually passed on by. A paper boy could be heard calling out the breaking news. His young, bellowing voice was interrupted by two pigeons cooing as they landed on the

windowsill, peering in at China and Tesla with their tiny, beady eyes.

"We have no time to waste, if you'll pardon the pun!" Tesla announced as he turned his back on the pigeons and reached into the pocket of his waistcoat for his pocket watch, to check on the time. "We really ought to get going soon," he added. "There is much to be done."

China had expected Tesla to take her to his laboratory at Wardenclyyfe, Long Island, which she had read about when she first became interested in his work. She was surprised to discover that his most secretive work was actually conducted in a laboratory much closer to his living quarters at the hotel. A five-minute walk around the block led them to a side street, which in turn led them to a narrow lane at the back of a disused warehouse. Following Tesla down the lane, China began to feel alarmed when she realised that they were walking towards a dead end. She stopped in her tracks and watched Tesla as he continued towards the bottom of the secluded lane. When he realised that China was no longer following him, he turned to face her.

"We're almost there, China," he announced, before turning back around to face the dead end.

"I don't understand," declared China. "You're walking towards a brick wall." China was genuinely concerned for Tesla's mindset, aware that many geniuses were indeed quite mad.

When Tesla reached the end of the lane, he stood stationary, gazing at the wall in front of him.

"Do hurry along. Time waits for no man!" Tesla quipped as he turned around to face China, holding out a hand and motioning for her to join him in front of the red brick wall. China reluctantly made her way down the lane towards him, wondering what to expect next.

"Ladies first," Tesla declared, as he gestured for her to step closer to the wall.

"I really don't understand what we're doing here," China responded, feeling a little foolish.

"Very well then ... Follow me," Tesla announced as he stepped into the brickwork and walked right through the wall, disappearing from China's sight.

China was gobsmacked and found that she couldn't bring herself to move from the spot where she stood. After a moment had passed, Tesla's upper half re-emerged from the wall, as he leaned back out into the lane to check on China.

"Think of it more as a doorway rather than a wall," Tesla suggested with a smirk, as he once again disappeared into the brickwork.

It was difficult at first to get her head around the idea of passing through a solid object, but she realised that it wasn't the first time she had walked through a wall. Her memory jogged back to the moment that she had passed through the wall of an abandoned farmhouse, while in a semi-solid state. With that thought in mind, she soon managed to muster up the courage to step through to the other side. At first, she felt the hard exterior of the wall as she pushed up against it. Then an unexpected barrier of coldness crept across her skin as she gently moved through the soft interior of the bricks. It almost felt as if she had stepped into a pool of water.

Although she had no real idea what to expect on the other side of the wall, she was stunned to discover that there was in fact nothing to see at all. Tesla was standing in the middle of a vast open space, in what appeared to be a derelict warehouse. The floor was covered with gritty, worn-looking, black and white tiles. Some were cracked in places and in dire need of a clean, giving the impression of an immense, dusty, old chessboard. There were eight enormous windows in a row on one side of the warehouse, which lit up the open space, as dust particles danced in the air through the shafts of sunlight. As China walked further into the room, she noticed a black, wrought-iron spiral staircase in the centre of the warehouse, where Tesla stood waiting for her. Seeing that she had managed to enter the building safely, Tesla began to ascend the

staircase. China followed with wonder, imagining that the second floor couldn't possibly be as disappointing as the first.

As she stood at the top of the staircase, China was instantly impressed by the magnitude of scientific equipment and apparatus that packed every inch of the spacious laboratory before her. She was fixed to the spot as she tried to take it all in. There was so much to see that she wasn't sure where to look first. Tall bookcases lined the walls on either side of the laboratory, all the way up to the high ceiling, their shelves crammed with scientific journals, documents and other specialised paraphernalia. Large, bulky cabinets stored glass jars and bottles labelled with every imaginable chemical, in both liquid and powdered form. The labels that China could read from where she was standing included: iodine, sodium, lithium, hydrofluoric acid and bromine among others. The long, steel-framed desks in the centre of the room were overladen with all manner of utensils and apparatus. Bunsen burners, petri dishes, microscopes with slides, cylinders, flasks, beakers and test tubes filled with multicoloured liquids were all chaotically scattered about the laboratory.

Tesla stood patiently waiting for China at the bottom of the staircase that led to the third floor. He watched her with interest as she ambled through the cluttered laboratory in a trance-like state. Her lips were partially open and her eyes were wide with wonder as she was clearly fixated by all that she saw. When they had both eventually made their way up to the third floor, China found that they could move no further into the room than two feet away from the staircase. No matter how much China attempted to push herself forward, she found that her body was being repelled backwards. Searching Tesla's face for an answer, China realised that he wasn't at all surprised by the resistance.

"This part of the laboratory accommodates my most important and highly classified work. It is crucial that these quarters are guarded at all times and so I have implemented a magnetic force-field to protect my most secretive of inventions," Tesla proudly

informed China, as he stood tall with his chest pushed out and his hands behind his back.

Looking around the wide-open space, China couldn't help wondering what exactly Tesla was staring at that filled him with so much pride. The room was completely bare. All that could be seen were the long, rustic floorboards stretching out across the immense, empty space. All the windows had clearly been bricked up for privacy and the only source of light came from rows of electric bulbs, which hung along the centre of the ceiling. China remained quiet, not knowing what to expect. She watched as Tesla held the palms of his hands outstretched in front of him and slowly moved them apart from one another in a circular fashion, as if swiping the air. The atmosphere in the room instantly began to change. The bulbs hanging overhead began to swing back and forth as bright electric sparks began to pop and fizzle in and out of existence. Tiny electrical currents, similar to lightning bolts, were emitted from the palms of his hands and sizzled as they began to flicker in and out of the atmosphere.

China stood back a step as Tesla's hands began to glow with white heat. With a burst of radiance, a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the entire room, forcing China to shield her eyes with her hands. When the brightness had dimmed, China opened her eyes to an amazing sight. At the centre of the room was an enormous glass dome, which took up a large amount of space. Within the glass were two tall, metal towers, reaching almost to the top of the dome. The towers were humming with energy, as electrically charged pulses buzzed and ripped through the air from the antennae at the top of each tower. To the back of the room, on the outside of the dome was a large area like the bridge of a ship, kitted out with a complicated-looking control panel. It was a construction of mechanical genius with a most complex-looking fusion of wires, buttons, cogs, gears and levers.

To the left of the control panel was a long, sturdy-looking desk, swamped with notebooks, journals, charts and blueprints. Tesla led China to the disorganised-looking desk and unrolled a large set of

blueprints. He hastily placed two paperweights, resembling rose-tinted, quartz crystals, on either side of the parchment. Lifting the lid of a dusty, old tea-chest beside the desk, he took out a rectangular wooden box, small enough to fit in both hands. He placed the device on top of the blueprints and smiled at it, as if he were looking into the twinkling eyes of a new-born baby for the first time. China could feel the pride beaming from Tesla, lifting upwards like rising steam as he gazed at his most prized invention. He carefully opened the hinged lid of the box to reveal a complex cluster of gears and cogs moving in a clockwise direction. Tesla's eyes lit up before he turned to speak to China.

"China, I give you the time machine!" Tesla looked like a child on Christmas morning, excitedly unwrapping his presents.

China was intrigued to think that something so powerful could be so small. She stared at the box, bewildered, not quite knowing what question to ask first. Her mind was working overtime, trying to imagine the science behind the creation.

"I am so close to a scientific breakthrough," Tesla informed China, thrilled by his accomplishments so far. "It is only a matter of time before I will be ready to conduct my very first experiment. There are just a few kinks in my theory that need to be ironed out first, but I am so close I can almost feel it!"

China was truly fascinated to spend time with Tesla in the very laboratory where he first invented time travel. As they whiled away the hours discussing his theories on the space-time continuum in great detail, Tesla was more than impressed by China's immense knowledge of quantum mechanics and electromagnetic technology. It was a rare pleasure for him to have a conversation with someone on his level. China felt utterly privileged to have the opportunity to discuss Tesla's classified projects and scientific theories. Tesla was aware of how fortunate he was to become privy to knowledge of future technology and forthcoming scientific discoveries. It was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Both China and Tesla were conscious of the fact that it would take time to come up with a solution, to prevent time travel from

being abused and avert a rip in space-time. They had both concluded that avoiding a future rip in space-time wouldn't solve the problems of the existing rips in time. It was looking as if it was impossible to release those unfortunate souls already trapped on the far side of time.

"Although it is disappointing that we cannot release those who are already trapped, at least we can prevent more souls from joining them," Tesla commented, as both he and China sieved through bunches of calculations with a fine-tooth comb.

The next few months passed relatively quickly for China, as the end of the year drew nearer. Living in a New York hotel room in 1917 was a whole new experience for her and yet it wasn't at all difficult for her to slip into Tesla's daily routine. Rising at six o'clock every morning, they left the hotel after breakfast, like clockwork. They routinely made their way through the busy streets by foot, before prowling down the narrow lane to step through the brick wall into Tesla's laboratory. Tesla had explained to China that the wall through which they entered the laboratory every day was in fact an optical illusion, another one of his genius inventions. It humoured Tesla to know that anyone who wished to pass through the wall was capable of doing so. He reassured China that it was a perfectly sound means of security, as there were not many people in the world crazy enough to randomly attempt walking through walls.

Before he met China, Tesla had planned to create a time machine that allowed timelines to be changed within a single universe, completely unaware of the negative consequences of such an invention. It was almost inconceivable to accept the fact that altering the past or future within the same universe could rip holes in space-time. China's main purpose was to help Tesla devise a barrier to stop time travellers from interfering with events within their own universe. They worked tirelessly each day to find a way to protect the space-time continuum. Following much debate about how best to tackle the issue, they decided to make a series of adjustments to the control panel on the bridge of the time

machine. The adjustments would prevent future time travellers from directly interfering with the history of their own universe. They then worked on a theory that allowed time travellers to make changes to timelines in alternate universes, meaning that life would carry on as normal within their own universe and any interference with time would go unnoticed. People all over the world would remain oblivious to the drastic effects of altering the past. Changing events in the past or future would only be possible in parallel universes, thus creating alternate multi-verses. The multi-verse was a scientific discovery that Tesla wouldn't have made if it were not for China's influence.

Those who chose to dabble with the idea of travelling forwards or backwards within their own universe would remain invisible and could only observe events as they unfolded, as if they were ghosts.

The days went by in a blur, giving way to long, tiresome nights as they continued to work diligently into the early hours of the morning. Many hours were spent poring over thick dusty manuals, drawing up new sets of blueprints, formulating new theories and calculations. They spent hours upon hours making countless readjustments and conducting various experiments within quantum and electromagnetic fields.

As December approached, China was beginning to feel exhausted. Late in the evenings, when she felt fatigued and needed stimulation to freshen up her thoughts, she would take a walk down the stairs to the second floor. She often stood at the bottom of the staircase and stuck her head out the window to get some air. It was just as she was about to lift the window up on one particularly tiresome night, that she paused to spy on a black Ford Model T car parked directly across the street from the building. She felt compelled to press her face up against the window pane to get a better look at the tall, slinky silhouette of a man standing on the pavement next to the car. The hat he wore hid his face from China's view and she watched him with great suspicion as he skulked about in his long, dark mac. China called out to Tesla as he stood next to the top of the staircase.

"There's a rather dubious-looking character loitering on the pavement outside," she announced, keeping her gaze firmly fixed on the stranger lurking in the shadows.

Tesla joined her at the window to peer out into the dimly lit street. As they watched the man lurking in the darkness, a second car came cruising down the street and pulled up directly behind the first. Another slender-looking man in a dark suit stepped out of the car and approached the man with the hat. China glanced at Tesla and saw an expression of deep concern etched across his face.

"The government has been watching my every move these past few years," Tesla revealed with an air of graveness in his tone. "They have raided my previous laboratory on several occasions. I have been approached by the Secret Service numerous times and asked to hand over my scientific papers and documents. They even seized equipment from my previous laboratory. They think they can bully me into working on behalf of the government, sharing my discoveries and inventions."

Tesla squinted as he leaned closer to the window and peered down at the two men talking to one another on the pavement below. Having caught a glimpse of the slender figure in the suit as he got out of the second car, Tesla felt that the man was somehow familiar to him and yet he was certain he had never met him before. Tesla's eyes followed the two men as they strolled along the pavement with their heads bent downwards as they conspired with one another. It was while they were standing under a lamppost that the man in the suit looked directly up at the window where China and Tesla were standing. The man wearing the hat immediately followed his colleague's gaze, locking eyes with Tesla. China noticed how Tesla's complexion instantly became ashen in colour. He seemed to be fixed to the spot with shock as he stared back at the men in the street below. It was when she turned her gaze back towards the two men that China could clearly see their features underneath the light of the lamppost. She gasped with fright to realise that both men were physically identical to Tesla, as if they

were carbon copies of him. It was obvious to China that Tesla was in a deep state of shock and so she tugged him back by the arm, away from the window.

"Did you see them?" Tesla questioned China, his eyes bulging out of his sockets like a frog. His voice was gravelly and his pace was slow as he continued to speak. "I always thought it was possible, but ... but I could never have been certain. It's obviously true. They do actually exist. You saw them too, China, didn't you?"

China wasn't sure how to answer his question. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

"Who would have thought it was possible?" Tesla stared wide-eyed at the floor without blinking as he spoke. "Who would have thought it was possible to meet your own doppelgangers?"

"Doppelgangers?" China questioned, searching Tesla's stunned-looking face for an explanation.

"Yes, doppelgangers," responded Tesla. "They are further proof that my theories are correct and that time travel is a reality. I have obviously travelled through time at some stage in the future and unknowingly created alternate versions of myself in parallel universes."

China was astonished at the prospect and listened intently as Tesla went into further detail.

"Every trip back or forth in time creates a contradiction if you like, which leads to the creation of an alternate universe, thus creating carbon copies of everything within the universe, including people. A doppelganger is an alternate version of a person."

China was utterly spellbound by the concept, wondering how many versions of herself she had created in her travels.

"What baffles me" – Tesla paused before continuing – "is the fact that two of my doppelgangers have ended up within the same universe as me at this very moment in time. Each one of us should be completely unaware of the other existing within separate universes, destined never to cross paths. It may perhaps be because the rip in space-time has allowed for such a paradox to occur."

Looking back out of the window at Tesla's doubles, China was

suddenly apprehensive as they met her gaze. The two men were standing still as they stared straight up at the window in a most ominous manner.

"Why do you suppose they've come here?" China asked warily. "Do you think their intentions towards you are harmful?"

Tesla paused and sighed wistfully before making his reply. "The fact that they appear to be keeping me under surveillance on a dark night does not bode well with me."

China's suspicions were confirmed when the doppelgangers walked across the street and attempted to enter the building by the front entrance. Their attempts were thwarted because it was boarded up with thick wooden planks. Having failed to break through the barricade at the front door, they began to pound ferociously on the planks of wood that Tesla had nailed across the windows on the first floor in recent weeks. Feeling reluctant to encounter their unwanted visitors, China and Tesla made their way downstairs to the first floor and left the building through the back wall, which led them into the narrow lane.

Back in the security of their hotel room, they sat up a while to discuss the night's events. Tesla was sure that the sight of his doppelgangers was an ill-fated omen. He deduced that the universe wasn't big enough for the three of them and that they were obviously aware of some predestined change in the structure of future time travel, which was about to unfold due to the alterations he was about to make. He suggested that any changes they made to his original draft of the time machine would dramatically affect parallel universes nearby, like the ripples of a stone thrown into a stream. The outcome would both create new universes and destroy existing ones, resulting in the obliteration of countless doppelgangers. Tesla reasoned that the two doppelgangers that had hunted him down were both aware of their demise. A slight change in Tesla's plans for the time machine could prevent his doppelgangers from ever being born. Their quest for survival had led them to the door of his laboratory. He believed that they simply wished to persuade him not to

make any alterations to his work and to stick to his original plans.

Tesla proposed that it was perhaps foolish to run and hide from his doppelgangers, considering that they were his carbon copies. He felt that he owed them both a thorough explanation for his actions and planned to discuss the matter with them, believing that they would be understanding and perhaps supportive of his work. China, on the other hand, wasn't so sure that it was a wise idea to have any form of communication with the menacing duo.

Peeking out from behind the curtains of the hotel room, China spotted a familiar-looking black Ford Model T parked across the street. Not far from the car and again standing under the light from the lamppost on the street corner, were two recognisable characters sporting distinguished-looking moustaches identical to Tesla's. Once more they stood silent and motionless, staring at the hotel window in a foreboding manner.

Over the course of the next few days, both China and Tesla were on high alert as they made their way to and from the laboratory. They had been careful to ensure that they were not being followed by Tesla's doppelgangers. Work continued as usual and although China was pleased that they were drawing closer to achieving their goals, she was regretful that they could do nothing to release the souls already trapped outside of time. This was a thought that pressed heavily against China's soul. Not a sunrise or sunset went by when she didn't spare a thought for Eric or Maddox. Maddox had become a lost cause for China, but the thought of her husband being trapped in the perpetual misery of a continuous war was utterly soul destroying. It was all she could do to throw herself into her work to keep her thoughts from torturing her.

A week had passed since their last sighting of Tesla's doppelgangers. Christmas had come and gone. New Year's Eve had arrived and the weather had taken a turn for the worse. The air was cold and crisp as China and Tesla plodded along in the snow on their way to the laboratory. They passed the daily toil along the

streets, through the crowds of men dressed in their Sunday best on their way to work and the elegant figures of women traipsing along the powdery white pavements on errands with their children. There was no time for New Year's Eve festivities, as they were just on the brink of making real progress in their work. Tesla could feel that they were on the eve of an important breakthrough, which made him more determined than ever to work right through the holiday season.

As they made their way through the narrow alley towards the wall of Tesla's laboratory that morning, their footprints trailed behind them in the snow. This was just the trail of breadcrumbs that Tesla's doppelgangers had been waiting to find.

The fumes from the chemicals that they had been working with in the laboratory on the second floor earlier that day were particularly overpowering, burning the back of China's nostrils and throat. It was just coming up to midnight as she got up from her seat at a chaotic-looking desk, strewn with test tubes, pestles, mortars, beakers, magnets, funnels and thermometers. She opened a window to let in the night air and stood a while listening to the energetic sound of merriment throughout the city that wafted along in the breeze, as folk gathered to ring in another year. Goosebumps began to surface on China's skin as she spotted a Ford Model T parked across the street. There was no sign of any activity along the pavement, which added to the eerie atmosphere that absorbed her. Swiftly turning on her heels to warn Tesla, she was shocked to discover that he was already aware of the threat. He was standing at the top of the staircase leading down to the second floor, almost frozen to the spot. Although Tesla was alarmed by the presence of the two doppelgangers looking up at him from the bottom of the staircase, he felt oddly intrigued by them. China watched with dread as Tesla stood motionless, almost entranced by the hollow sound of their feet pounding on the steps as they quickly descended the stairs. It was completely uncanny for Tesla to be face-to-face with two carbon copies of himself.

Taking a few steps backwards, Tesla remained silent as he made

way for his doppelgangers. China made her way towards the uninvited guests and stood staunchly at Tesla's side. The man wearing the hat and mac spoke with the exact same vocal inflection as Tesla.

"We urge you not to make any further alterations to your plans for the time machine."

Tesla looked to China with disbelief at the situation they had found themselves in.

The man wearing the hat continued to speak, all the while focusing his gaze on Tesla. "It is imperative that you continue your work as originally planned. Any adjustments from this moment on would result in dire consequences for countless numbers of parallel universes."

Tesla was instant with his reply. "I'm afraid there are more significant consequences for the fate of this universe in particular if I refrain from altering my original plans. It is my duty to humanity to prevent any further damage within the future timeline of our world."

"Then we have ourselves quite a complex conflict of interest, I'm sure you will agree," remarked the man in the hat as he reached into the inside breast pocket of his mac and produced a pistol. Although the man in the suit remained silent, he succeeded in exuding a menacing demeanour, staring wildly at Tesla as if focusing all his energy on the task. Both China and Tesla automatically began to step slowly backwards away from the gun, which was pointed directly at Tesla.

What happened next unfolded so quickly that it would have been almost impossible to prevent. The man in the hat wielding the cocked pistol turned his attention to China and swiftly took his aim before making a chilling statement.

"You leave me no other choice."

The sound of the gunshot tore through the air as the bullet thrust forward at lightning speed from the barrel of the pistol, directly in China's path. Although there had been no time to predict the outcome of the situation, Tesla instantly threw himself

in front of China, directly in the path of the bullet. China could hear her own screams as Tesla dropped to the floor with a thud. She stared wide-eyed in disbelief at the blood trickling from his parted lips. His eyes were empty and lifeless as his body lay motionless. There was nothing that could have been done to save his life; the bullet had already pierced his heart.

The man in the hat proceeded to complete his mission as he aimed the pistol directly at China once more and pulled the trigger. This time there was no sound from the gunshot. All that echoed throughout the thick walls of the laboratory were China's cries at the sight of the ruthless, cold-blooded murderer standing before her. She instinctively closed her eyes as every muscle in her body tensed to embrace the pain. To her total surprise, the pain never materialised. Her heart was beating wildly as her eyes flitted open, just in time to discover that the two doppelgangers were completely invisible from the waist downwards. Their torsos, all the way up to the crown of their heads, began to rapidly fade into nothingness. The bullet and the pistol had completely vanished a split second before China could have been shot. She couldn't believe her luck.

Having shot the man who would have gone on to invent the time machine, Tesla's doppelgangers had become an impossible paradox. Without the concept of time travel, his clones couldn't possibly exist. His doppelganger had committed the ultimate double atrocity, managing to eliminate himself twice over.



CHAPTER 16
A VERY UNLIKELY ENDING



Three months had passed since Tesla's unexpected death. Looking out of the window from her hotel room, China could see the paperboy below yelling out the morning's headlines.

US VICTORY OVER GERMAN U-BOAT ATTACK

Ever since that cursed night when Tesla had been killed, China had struggled to see a way forward. The fate of the entire cosmos had changed so dramatically in that one brief moment of madness and yet the world was completely oblivious to it. The time machine as China had known it had never been invented. Tesla had died, having never completed his life-long ambition to create a means of time travel. China now lived in an alternate universe so very closely modelled on the one she had come from and yet increasingly more different as time went on.

There were so many more discoveries and inventions that had spawned from time travel that would never come to fruition. An almost infinite number of parallel universes would never have existed. Countless souls would never be born. For all China knew, her entire ancestry and her family as she knew them might never

have existed for her to be born. She herself was a walking paradox. The only thing protecting her from fading into the ether and being extinguished like the flame of a candle was the fact that her soul was made of electricity. She had the gift to walk the thin line between existence and extinction.

The miracle of her existence was unfortunately not enough to lift the dark clouds of doom, which had hung over China since all had been lost. It had been the most trying and most lonesome time in her life. There was no means of returning to the void outside of time to find her husband and she couldn't even be sure if he or her family even existed anymore. She thought it almost incredible to find herself completely stranded in 1918, with no hope of ever locating her loved ones and utterly isolated from society. Her time travel book had ceased to exist the moment Tesla had been shot. She couldn't even contact the messenger as the pocket watch no longer existed. The heavy feeling of failure had pressed down on her like a ton of bricks, making her feel even more dejected.

A week of sleepless nights passed by before China began to think more clearly. As she lay in bed with her sheets ruffled from tossing and turning, she began to realise that she had learned more from those few months spent in Tesla's company than she could ever have expected to. She glanced at the clock on the wall as she began to get dressed. It was three a.m. The streets were completely secluded as she hurried along the pavement towards the old abandoned warehouse where it had all gone wrong. She could no longer access the building through the back wall and so she made her way towards the front of the building. As she stood outside the entrance, she took a good long look around to make sure that she wasn't being watched. The entrance to the building was still boarded up, but the windows on the first floor were not. All the windows were nailed shut from the inside except for one window, which she had deliberately left open the night that she had to make her way out of the building, when Tesla had been killed. Tesla's death meant that she was no longer able to walk

through the back wall. His existence had become a paradox the very moment his doppelganger shot him. China had slipped into an alternate timeline in which Tesla had never been born. The illusion of a brickwork wall to enter and exit the building had never been invented. She had found herself trapped inside the building and so she made her way out through one of the front windows on the first floor.

She made her way up the familiar staircase with a satchel full of tools and notebooks slung over her shoulder and a candle in one hand to provide light. China spent the rest of the early hours of that morning sitting on the cold, wooden floorboards of the third floor as she began to lay out the foundations of a new set of blueprints to build a time machine of her own. As the daylight flooded through the windows of the empty warehouse, the sun began to break through the clouds of her mind.

For several weeks, China spent every waking minute, every thought and every breath, studying the legacy that Tesla had bequeathed to her. She was at last beginning to slot the final pieces of the puzzle together. Tesla's prior contributions combined with China's invaluable expertise in quantum mechanics resulted in the leap forward for which they had both been striving towards before his death. China was almost ready to give the world what it was destined to have – the invention of the time machine. Tesla himself had come so close to the completion of his work. He had realised that by bending space-time, timelines actually had the potential to turn back on themselves, forming a loop or a closed time curve. He had played around with the idea that the power of an electromagnetic gravitational field could generate closed time curves. It would only have been a matter of conducting a small number of experiments before Tesla would have invented his very own time machine. China had no difficulty in following Tesla's lead, but she had so much more to accomplish to confine time travel to the realms of the multi-verse.

A flashback from her days spent in the trenches with Eric flickered into her mind. She instantly pushed all thoughts of the

Perpetual War to the back of her mind; she didn't wish to be burdened with the guilt of knowing that she couldn't rescue the stranded souls outside of time. Instead, she chose to fill her head with positive thoughts and focused on all the encouraging things that she had achieved.

The weather, like China's mood, was a great deal calmer and milder than it had been for a long time. The stormy, dark nights, just like the thick, brooding clouds of doubt clogging up China's mind, had finally passed, giving way to clarity. It was time to return home to Liverpool. The journey by steam liner took several days and gave her plenty of time to think about her next move.

Arriving at her hotel in Liverpool, China really began to take in her surroundings like never before and was beginning to feel rather nostalgic. It was extremely satisfying to know that she was finally ready to conduct the world's first ever time travel experiment. It was a bitter sweet moment to think that such a great mind had been literally shot down in his prime, and yet she was filled with pride at the knowledge that she had succeeded in mastering the unthinkable feat, entirely on her own. She knew that her grandfather would have been so very proud of her and she acknowledged the fact that he had taught her well. It felt so good to finally feel as if she had achieved what she set out to do and although she could never have dreamed that events would have unfolded the way they did, she was beginning to wonder if it was her destiny all along to invent the concept of time travel. In a world where the direction of time wasn't set in stone, it was difficult to determine which events had the ability to influence others.

China sat at her desk sifting through bunches of equations and calculations, checking and re-checking her computations to ensure that everything would go according to plan the following day, when she would unleash her gift to the world.

Although she didn't sleep a wink that night, the next morning had finally arrived and China was ready to unveil her great invention to the world. Winter Time was destined to flourish as one of the largest and most successful time travel co-ops that would ever

grace the world, owned and run by citizens across the globe, free from the tyranny of government and military control. She had chosen Bold Street in Liverpool for the public demonstration, in honour of Tesla's contribution. She wished to pay tribute to the fact that it had been the location of Tesla's first ever time travel experiment in a previous timeline. The memory of Rasputin's words echoed through the vault of her mind.

"You are destined for greatness."

The streets were black with people. Businesses had been closed and streets had been cordoned off at various points around the city, allowing as many men, women and children as possible to have the opportunity to witness the most spectacular discovery in the history of the world. Although much of the world was still at war in the spring of 1918, this phenomenal innovation would open new and exciting horizons for mankind, serving as a diversion from the brutal reality of the First World War. Of course, there were many people who had the notion that it would be possible to travel back in time to prevent the war from erupting in the first place, but the cold reality was that China's modified version of time travel wouldn't allow such an event to occur within the current universe. Preventing a war from happening in the first place would only be of benefit to those who dwelled in a parallel universe.

Winter Time gave people the opportunity to change their past and relive a different version of their lives within an alternate universe. The possibilities were boundless. The beauty of it all was that people could control their destiny without negatively affecting the nature of events within their own timeline. Time could be manipulated without dire consequences. Man could bend the constraints of time to his will and yet nothing about the current universe would change. Time would appear to flow forwards only and no damage would occur to the space-time continuum. Not another soul would ever again become trapped outside of time or caught up in a perpetual war. Never again would another soul be

prevented from crossing over after their death. The only flipside was that those who intended to overstay their welcome in a parallel universe, living out their lives in an alternative reality, would eventually come across their doppelgangers, the consequences of which were anyone's guess.

For the purpose of the demonstration, China chose to open a portal on Bold Street, allowing anyone present to be transported into the future by thirty years. The crowds gathered even closer around the podium, where she stood in the centre of Bold Street and produced a small black box in the palms of her hands. A lull fell over the din of excited spectators as they waited for something marvellous and mind-blowing to occur. The spectators were certainly not about to be disappointed. Although time ticked on, it seemed as if the world had come to a complete standstill. China could feel the crowd's anticipation welling up inside her, like an overflowing fountain. As she opened the lid of the black box, the sudden sound of gasps rippled through the crowds. Spectators watched with enthusiasm as an enormous circular disc of glowing light formed a tunnel-like entrance close to the podium where China was standing. For such a small device, China's time machine was a sophisticated piece of technology. It was capable of producing such a mammoth magnitude of energy to form a portal allowing people a safe passage through time. The time machine was sensitive to thought, which meant that all China had to do was simply think about a location and a specific date in time, before lifting the lid of the box to open the portal.

Staring wide-eyed at the glowing portal that had materialised before them, the spectators began to move even closer to the podium. China invited her captivated audience to step through the portal to the other side of the street. One-by-one, the people followed each other with wonder as they stepped through the glowing portal. People found that they had been instantly transported into the future. Many people were rendered speechless as they mingled with pedestrians from 1948 while they carried on with their daily activities. The silence was soon drowned by a wave

of dumbfounded gasps. People could hardly believe their eyes and gaped in astonishment at the unusual fashions of the future, how short women's skirts had become and the presence of so many futuristic-looking cars travelling along the street. Horns tooted and beeped at the time travellers who had wandered out into the traffic, in shock of what they were witnessing.

The busy scene became somewhat chaotic when throngs of men and women from the future began to crowd around a group of time travellers, staring at their old-fashioned clothing and hairstyles. Several women and children fled from the time travellers in terror, running as quickly as their legs could carry them, while shouting to warn others about the ghosts. When the time travellers returned to their own timeline, they observed the fact that not one single thing had changed within their own environment.

The demonstration was a massive success. Entrepreneurs from every corner of the land were present, waiting for their chance to arrange an interview with China. Government officials from many different countries were lining up to question her at the press conference, which was conducted after the demonstration had been given. China had plans to share her technology with a select number of ethically moral entrepreneurs rather than disclose her secrets to government officials who could use the knowledge for corrupt means.

A number of hectic weeks blurred by and in the wake of the celebrations, China found that her dark thoughts began to surface once more. Despite her achievements, China was still deeply discontented to know that so many souls were continuing to suffer, imprisoned in a timeless void. Having completed the task that she had been asked to carry out, China felt that it was time for her to move on. Her first port of call was Auschwitz. She wished to visit Tesla, the older version of himself, whose soul was still doomed to spend all of eternity trapped outside of time. As China was the only being who could travel beyond the very boundaries of time itself and back, she felt that it was her duty to report back to Tesla on how events had unfolded. Although she could never vow to

repair the rip in space-time, China had spent a considerable amount of time devising a most complex plot to release those held in captivity outside of time. She planned to run her ideas by the great genius, Tesla, seeking his expert opinion.

"China! I'm so happy to see you again. You have succeeded in saving countless numbers of souls from a fate worse than death. I'm so very proud of you!" Tesla was beaming at China with pride as they both sat on the hard, wooden bench in his cell. The authorities chose to keep Tesla secluded from all other prisoners, fearing the power of his influence over others.

"But how did you know?" China enquired, her eyes full of innocence, perplexed by Tesla's warm acknowledgement.

"I've been watching over you from afar. I know how diligently you have been working. I have been cheering you on every step of the way."

The lines around Tesla's eyes tightened as he smiled at China.

"Then you must have seen the theorems and equations I have been working on over the past few days. You must be aware of my next move."

China was intrigued to learn what Tesla would think of her plans.

"I have every faith in your abilities, China. I know you are more than capable of achieving anything that you set your mind to. You are the only one who can release us from this never-ending turmoil." Tesla leaned forward where he was seated on the bench and placed his head in his hands. China felt slightly awkward when she realised that he was beginning to sob. "I've watched over you ever since you were a little girl," Tesla sobbed. "I have been by your side, guiding you and protecting you right from that very black day when the accident took place."

China was taken aback by Tesla's revelation and remained silent, allowing him to explain in further detail. Wiping his tears and rubbing his eyes with one hand, Tesla stood up and took a few steps towards the bare concrete wall on the far side of the cell. Without saying a word, he placed the palms of his hands upon the

cold plaster of the wall. As he stood in this peculiar position for a moment, China was unsure what to expect next. Much to her surprise, Tesla's hands began to light up with energy. China gasped as she watched the blazing brightness spread from Tesla's hands and expand across the length of the wall, lighting it up like a screen. Tesla returned to China's side of the cell and stood erect against the wall with his hands behind his back.

"I don't understand," China remarked, looking to Tesla for an explanation.

"Just watch," Tesla instructed her, staring ahead at the glowing wall with a look of total dejection spread across his face. China's gaze returned to the wall in front of her, as it began to glow even more intensely. She watched with wonder as a vision began to appear, playing out like a movie, stretched across the length of the wall. The image of an antique airplane came into focus as it flew silently across a cloudless sky. China could hardly believe what she was seeing when her father came into focus, smiling lovingly at his wife as she sat by his side, holding five-year-old China on her lap. Much to China's surprise, the next image showed Tesla at work in what seemed to be a large, cluttered-looking warehouse. He appeared to be constructing a rather complex piece of machinery and could be seen tinkering away with a hammer and chisel. China watched as another image flashed before her eyes. It was her mother and father laughing as their plane glided along through wisps of clouds. As the vision played on, it revealed a side to Tesla that the world wasn't aware of. Tesla couldn't bear to look at his own image as it flashed onto the wall of his cell. China continued to watch as an image of Tesla could be seen standing calmly in front of a highly sophisticated-looking control panel with his hand resting on a metal lever. As he received a nod of approval from a stern-faced man decked out in full military attire, Tesla pulled the lever downwards. The next clip was the most harrowing for China to observe. Tears involuntarily slid down her soft rosy cheeks as she watched her father's plane crash and burn. The vision came to an

end as a passer-by pulled China's slight frame from the wreckage of the plane.

Tesla pulled himself away from the wall he had been leaning against and hunkered down directly in front of China where she sat weeping. Ever so gently, he took hold of China's hands and tried to gain eye contact with her, which was difficult to do as her head was bent downwards while she wept.

Tesla squeezed China's hands tightly, attempting to convey his remorse. His voice was low pitched and gentle as he spoke.

"I need you to understand, China, that I never imagined the brutal consequences of my actions. I was young and foolish ... and I guess I was flattered when the US Government approached me to conduct military experiments the year after I had invented the time machine. My work was set in the future, during your parents' time. My mission was to develop the next generation of military weapons. It took several years for me to construct the death ray. The device was a discreet means of targeting enemies at a distance using sound-barrier technology."

China's thoughts were tied up in knots. She found it difficult to fathom that the man she had idolised her whole life had in fact been responsible for her parents' death.

Tesla's guilty mind was far more suffocating than the poky cell that confined him. Imprisoned by his own remorseful thoughts, he felt obliged to come clean to China about his past. He had yearned for her forgiveness for so long and although he finally got the opportunity to ask for it, he certainly never expected to receive it. Luckily for him, she was a great deal more forgiving than he could have imagined. As far as China was concerned, Tesla's imprisonment was punishment enough for his crimes. His regret was proof enough to her that he had learned from his mistakes and progressed as a deeply ethical soul. Tesla wept joyful tears, overwhelmed by the feeling of relief as China pardoned him for his part in her parents' death.

The sound of heavy footsteps stomping towards Tesla's cell forced China to make a speedy exit.

Standing in the doorway of her grandfather's workshop, China felt an unexpected inner peace that she hadn't felt in a long time. She was beside herself with joy to realise that her grandfather still existed. As she stepped into the workshop, the sunlight radiated through her long, golden hair, causing it to glow like an aura.

Mr Winter was astounded to see his granddaughter, whom he had suspected he would never see again. Warm, salty tears spilled down China's cheeks as Mr Winter threw his arms around her. Her grandfather's welcoming embrace and the familiar woody scent of the workshop brought so many happy memories flooding back to her all at once.

"You have no idea how much you have been missed, my dear," Mr Winter remarked, as he hugged his granddaughter tightly. "I have so many questions to ask you, but first you must tell me if you have any news of Maddox," he added.

China tried to hide her expression as she frowned. "I will tell you everything, grandfather, but I think we should both sit down with a nice cup of strong tea before I begin," China suggested.

Without delay, Mr Winter instructed one of the automatons to bring tea into the parlour, where they sat down to catch up with each other. It was a long afternoon as China relayed details of the most remarkable journey she had ever experienced in her life. Mr Winter was fascinated to hear of her extraordinary encounters and thrilled to hear of her marriage. She had deliberately delayed telling her grandfather about Maddox for as long as she could, before Mr Winter once more enquired about his welfare.

"I can only imagine that he was not of sound mind when he decided to join forces with the White Knights. They obviously tortured and brainwashed him to the extent that he lost control of his mind," Mr Winter reasoned.

China was disappointed that she couldn't give her grandfather more positive news regarding Maddox, but she was sure it was a relief for him to know that he was still alive. The more stories that China divulged to her grandfather, the more questions that seemed to burn through his mind. He was intrigued by the concept of a

crack within space-time and alarmed to hear of the Great Perpetual War. The biggest shock Mr Winter received was to discover that the great and much-admired Tesla was responsible for the death of his son and daughter-in-law. It was almost too much for Mr Winter to take in as he sat back in his green, leather armchair, gobsmacked at all that China had been through. The most peculiar thing of all was the fact that very little time had passed for Mr Winter in comparison to China. It had only been a matter of weeks since China's grandfather had last seen her, before she left for the front and yet three years had passed for China. There was much for Mr Winter to ponder over as he retired to bed that night.

The next few days were challenging for Mr Winter, as he had vowed to assist China with her plans to restore order to the universe. It wasn't the first time in China's young life that she had been faced with an almost impossible feat. She liked to think of the rip in space-time as another of life's gruelling challenges. Slipping between the cracks in time was the easy part; repairing the damage wouldn't be so easy.

It took three days to construct the Time Bomb, which China had designed, based on a complex theory of quantum time dilation. China had realised that the electromagnetic gravitational field within the timeless vacuum could be compressed to a singularity. Introducing the correct amount of dark matter would eventually cause the singularity to implode, releasing virtually all trapped energy. It was the single most significant project that Mr Winter had ever worked on. He was simply bursting with pride at how far China had come from the shattered five-year-old little girl, whose broken body lay stretched out in the grassy field the day of the accident. China was equally proud of her grandfather's contribution. It was his expert knowledge of clockmaking that added the crucial final touch to the project. Under China's instruction, Mr Winter crafted a caesium clock, complete with a detonator fashioned from dark matter. On completion of the Time Bomb, China planned to travel back through the crack in space-time and person-

ally detonate it in the vacuum of space located outside of time, releasing all the trapped souls that lingered there.

Although her ambitious plan was sure to succeed, China had absolutely no idea what the outcome would be for the universe as she knew it. There would of course be consequences to her actions, ever so slight changes to the fabric of space-time, but the risks were a necessary evil. Her uncertainty for the future caused her to presume that it was highly unlikely that she would see her grandfather ever again. Her grandfather was of the same sentiment. Feeling rather nostalgic, China rambled throughout the numerous floors and rooms of her grandfather's workshop, intending to have as many images of her old home as possible embedded within her memories. Wandering into the store to take one final look around, China ran her fingertips along the polished, walnut countertop, deeply inhaling the wonderfully exotic scents of wood and spices as she soaked in the sight of the quirky, vintage antiques that surrounded her. Ever since she was a child, the store, with its outlandish and mysterious wonders, had always been her favourite place to be. It was a surreal moment for China and her grandfather as they said their goodbyes. The teeming rain that pelted down upon the rooftops reflected the melancholy mood as China departed, returning to her demise.

Passing through the gap in time, China suddenly realised that she had come to the end of her journey. She was entering the timeless vacuum for the final time. Her thoughts were overflowing with memories of the precious moments she had spent with Eric. It frustrated her to think of him being lost in time, having no idea where he was or how he was coping. Not being able to say goodbye to him was hard enough, but knowing that she would never see him again was unbearable. The only consolation she had was to know that his soul would finally be free to pass over to the other side. His spirit, just like all the rest of the tortured souls, would finally be at peace. As for Maddox, it was impossible to guess how the story would end for him. Being half-human and half-machine, China found herself questioning how much of his soul was left to

save. As for the White Knights, it didn't seem as if there was any justice in the world to see them go unpunished for their war crimes. The Time Bomb would definitely put an end to their bloody reign, but it couldn't change the past.

Having found herself standing in the centre of a snow-covered forest, China traipsed through the difficult terrain, her feet sinking into the snow as she plodded onwards. The threatening sound of cavalry charging through the forest towards their adversaries had encouraged her to seek a more discreet location to unleash her weapon. The din of clashing swords and the noise from men and horses crying out in pain from their injuries grew nearer. Coming to a steep embankment, China scuttled down the side of the snow-covered mound and sought shelter in a cavern on lower ground, out of sight from the medieval knights who battled bitterly on higher ground close by. Huddled in the safety of the rocky cavern, she peered out into the open sky above, struggling to make sense of the chopping sound that ripped through the sky above. As she struggled to see the source of the noise, a volley of machine-gun fire rained down on the unsuspecting knights. They bravely fought, unfazed by the fact that the bullets belonged to another time and place.

China watched as a helicopter came into sight, hovering above the treetops, causing leaves, twigs and small branches to swirl around in a miniature whirlwind. She crawled further into the cavern when she realised that some of the knights began to cascade down the embankment to escape the metal craft that hovered over their heads. It amused her to see one of the brave knights standing defiantly, waving his sword in the air at the helicopter above, despite the hail of bullets. China could wait no longer; it was time to end the bloodshed. Reaching into the pocket of her skirt for the hand grenade that she had spent the last few days constructing, she began to tremble. The grenade looked like any standard military-issue she had ever seen before, except that the interior of this grenade consisted of an intricate electromagnetic timepiece and enough dark matter to bring an end to the

perpetual purgatory for countless souls. Pulling the pin of the grenade, China experienced a sudden flashback of the peculiar old hag that she had encountered on the streets of Liverpool years earlier. The old woman's words began to echo through China's tired mind.

*"He waits for you! ... He needs your help! ... Your time is up! ... I see a bomb!
... You must continue without him!"*

China knew that the man who was waiting for her, in need of her help, was Tesla and she would indeed have to carry on without him. The irony was that she would also have to carry on without Eric and Maddox too.

As she charged out of the cavern into the snow-covered scene, holding the live grenade in one hand, China flung the device as far away as possible. She braced herself for the unknown. Surprisingly, there was no terrific explosion. The impact of the detonated Time Bomb was silent as the grave. Everything faded into a bleak darkness as China instantly lost consciousness. The world outside of time had suddenly ceased to exist. Any energy that had been trapped within the timeless vacuum had now been released. Each and every tortured soul was finally free to move on. The war had come to an end.

It should have spelled the end of a chapter in China's short life and yet her story was to continue as she gradually opened her eyes to find that she was lying stretched out on a luxurious, four-poster bed, with the finest of satin sheets and lace trimmings. Feeling startled, she lay still for a moment, trying to take in her surroundings. Looking around the small but elegantly furnished room, she spotted a porthole, indicating that she was on a ship. The view from the porthole almost took China's breath away. The rosy tint from the setting sun bled upon the ripples of the ocean's surface, blurring the horizon where the water's edge met the sky as the ship sailed far out to sea.

As soon as China left her cabin, she was suddenly aware that

she had once more travelled back in time. She watched open-mouthed as other passengers strolled along the corridor, coming and going from their cabins. All the passengers were dressed in the fashions from the turn of the twentieth century. The women wore long evening gowns with long, white gloves. Their hair was neatly pinned up under large, wide-brimmed hats, which were decorated elaborately with flowers and lace trimmings. The men wore expensive-looking suits and dinner jackets, complete with top hats and white gloves. It was obvious from the passengers' attire that China's cabin was in the first-class quarters of the ship. Her gut-wrenching suspicions were confirmed when she had politely stopped two gentlemen walking past her in the corridor to enquire about the name of the ship that she had boarded.

"Why it's the *HMS Titanic* of course!" scoffed the chubby, moustached man as he wrinkled his brow at the absurdity of such a question. China's stomach flipped as she heard the name of the ship.

"Could you be so kind as to tell me what date it is today, sir?" China questioned, biting her lip with anticipation as she waited for the answer.

The chubby gentleman looked to his tall, lean companion with a rather perplexed expression, before turning his gaze back to China and answering her question.

"It's the twelfth of April, nineteen hundred and twelve, my dear. Are you quite alright, young lady? Should we fetch a physician for you?"

China recoiled in horror upon hearing the date and backed away from the two concerned-looking gentlemen. She began to sprint through the corridor towards the exit, so she could get some air out on deck. Passengers stared and pointed at her, noticing her panic-stricken state. Holding onto the ship's railing, China stared out at the vast ocean surface as it stretched out to meet the horizon. Darkness began to fold in around the ship as the sun sank beneath the waves. Goosebumps began to rise on the surface of her skin as she recalled a dream she had of Tesla pointing at the

Titanic, a long time ago. Unsure of its significance, the dream had remained at the back of China's mind for quite some time. Now it made perfect sense; the image of the Titanic had been a premonition.

China was the only soul on board to know that the Titanic was hours away from sinking into the ocean just as the sun did. She watched other passengers strolling along the promenade deck, heading back towards their cabins, totally oblivious to the fact that they had just witnessed their last ever sunset. The sea was unusually calm, like a millpond, which of course made it more difficult to spot an iceberg. The sky and the sea appeared to merge into one. The chill in the air prevented passengers from hanging about on the deck too long, and so China soon found herself standing alone, looking to the star-lit heavens above, watching the mist from her breath rising upwards. She was perfectly aware that she could make an intervention, preventing the ship from colliding with the iceberg and potentially saving all souls on board. She felt numb inside to think that she was powerless to prevent the calamity from occurring. She had learned that to change history within her own universe was to interfere with the laws of nature. The consequences would be even more catastrophic in the long run, leading to further rips in the fabric of space-time. She had already witnessed first-hand the devastation and havoc that could result from such interference. Her mind had already been made up. She would face her fate and go down with the ship.

It was stomach-churning stuff, to wait patiently for the Grim Reaper to rear his ugly head, helpless to do anything about it.

The pandemonium that unravelled on board the Titanic that night was just as traumatic as historical accounts had reported it to be. Men were torn from the arms of their wives and children, while second- and third-class passengers, including women and children, were doomed to face the final curtain.

The last few moments on board what remained of the ship were the most harrowing. It was soul-destroying for China to listen to the haunting moans and high-pitched wailing of men, women

and children, as they fell from the upturned hull of the ship into the depths of doom below them. Bodies and various bits of debris were tossed carelessly into the sea. As she hung on for dear life, China found it incredible to witness people, followed by suitcases and various other bits of debris, all hurtling past her towards the water's edge below. She watched as clothing, smashed glass, broken furnishings, fixtures and fittings all tumbled on past her. Eventually, China found that she could no longer hold onto the pillar that she had been gripping. The moment was finally upon her; her life was about to end. Surprisingly, she had no time for images of her life to flash before her eyes, before she plunged to her suffocating death. The last thought that crossed her mind was a vision of the White Star Line building on James Street in Liverpool, where relatives of the passengers would soon pile up to check the obituary notices. She had been impressed by the history behind the building as she had passed by it on her way to volunteer with the Red Cross. Little did she think that she was destined to become part of its history.

Her struggle to breathe soon gave way to an eerie silence. The pitch-black darkness of nothingness closed in around her lifeless body as she floated in her watery grave. She had made the ultimate sacrifice. She could have so easily saved her own life, not to mention others, by changing the course of events and yet she chose to die honourably for the greater good of humanity.



SEVERAL MONTHS HAD PASSED since China's death. Large clusters of daisies began to push up through the grass that grew on her grave. The sun beamed down from a cloudless, blue sky as a dark shadow fell over the words engraved upon her headstone.

*HERE LIES CHINA WINTER
INVENTOR OF TIME TRAVEL*

2239-1912

China smiled to herself as she stood in the secluded graveyard in front of her own grave. Life seemed to turn on a dime and yet here she was, alive and well, unlike the rest of the passengers who had lost their lives. The unfortunate events of that tragic night would remain etched into her memories forever and a day.

As she pulled out the broken compass from the pocket of her skirt, she spared a thought for her brother, who unfortunately chose a different path in life to hers. Eric also flashed into her mind and yet she felt no resentment towards the world for her loss. She had graciously accepted her fate.

Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, China felt content with the world. She was happy to know that she had done all she could have done. Staring at her name upon the gravestone, she noticed a second dark shadow moving across hers as someone joined her. She was instantly struck by the most intense feeling of *déjà vu* she had ever felt. Following the shadow with her eyes, she turned to face the visitor behind her and came face-to-face with a familiar sight. Her heart skipped several beats as she was confronted head on by her very own doppelganger. Their eyes locked sight on each other as they both stood transfixed to the spot. China felt that this was unlikely to be the end of her journey and was perhaps only the beginning.



AUTHOR'S NOTES

Although this book is considered a work of fiction, many events have been based on facts:

Nikola Tesla, the great twentieth-century physicist, engineer and accomplished inventor, made it into our history books for numerous innovative achievements, one of which wasn't time travel. This simple fact should not lead us to believe that he was never responsible for such an invention. It is of course a plausible argument to suggest that he may perhaps have been credited with such an achievement in a parallel universe.

Time travel is no longer deemed to be a figment of science fiction, but has become a scientific fact in recent years. The concept of Time Dilation is concrete proof that future time travel is in fact possible. Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity states that time and space are connected. It is not possible to move in space without moving in time. It is a proven fact that the faster a clock travels, the slower time flows. The effects of velocity on time are not noticeable in everyday life, but become noticeable at the speed of light.

In the 1970s, scientists conducted an experiment regarding the

effect of speed on time. They placed atomic clocks on fast-flying planes that circumnavigated the earth twice. The clocks on the planes slowed down in comparison to clocks on the ground, which indicated that not as much time passed for the clocks on the planes. An experiment such as this means that man could potentially leave earth's atmosphere flying a craft at the speed of light and return at some stage in the distant future, having aged more slowly than those left behind on earth.

Not only does the force of speed affect the flow of time, but the force of gravity has also been proven to affect it. The theory of Gravitational Time Dilation states that the more gravity there is, the slower time progresses, until time appears to stop. It is a known fact that clocks on airplanes move at a slower rate of time than clocks on earth, due to the pull of gravity. The Pound-Rebka experiment in 1959 was conducted to test the theory that clocks closer to a source of gravity are distorted and run slower. The use of GPS navigation systems today is proof of this time distortion

As for time travel into the past, it is believed by some scientists that travelling beyond the speed of light may cause time to flow backwards. The biggest challenge for the scientific community to achieve such an accomplishment is to produce enough energy to travel beyond the speed of light.



Teleportation experiments have already been tried and tested by the scientific community. In 2014, scientists in the Netherlands achieved a breakthrough in quantum teleportation. Professor Ronald Hanson stated that the possibility of the fictional *Star Trek* concept of being 'beamed up' could become a reality at some stage in the future.



Scientists are now working on theories to prove the existence of a

multi-verse, which indicates that our universe is not the only one of its kind. It is believed parallel universes do actually exist. This means that we live our lives in an infinite number of alternate realities, unaware of the existence of our carbon copies. For each decision we make and each action we take in our lives, it is thought that a new parallel universe comes into existence to allow for every possible outcome of a situation. Space-time is thought to stretch out to infinity. It is believed that everything within a universe repeats itself at some point, creating a patchwork quilt of infinite universes.

There are theories suggesting that every idea or thought that we imagine is real and exists within the multi-verse. Quantum mechanics theory suggests that all possible outcomes of a situation occur in their own separate universe. In each universe, a copy of a person thinks that their reality is the only one.

In 1954, a Princeton student by the name of Everett developed the theory that the observation of quantum matter creates a split in the universe, which means that an infinite number of realities must exist to account for all possible outcomes of a situation. The Many Worlds Theory suggests that an infinite number of parallel universes exist and that there are infinite copies of every person that will ever exist. We experience our lives unaware of our infinite realities in parallel universes. The reality that we experience is thought to be a small fragment of an infinitive existence.



Numerous reports of poltergeists have been recorded throughout the centuries. The first recorded cases of poltergeists date back as far as 530 AD. The term, which is German for 'noisy spirit', can include all manner of activities, including: unexplained noises, disincarnate voices, fires, apparitions, objects moving or levitating and other general phenomenon associated with haunting. For centuries poltergeists were thought of as spirits, ghosts or demons. Research in the 1930s pointed the finger of blame at young adoles-

cents with repressed emotions, such as anger or sexual frustration. Manifestations are thought to evolve from psychokinetic energy, whereby the mind is capable of affecting matter. It was also believed that limestone, quartz or natural running water were sources of psychokinetic energy.

A more recent scientific-based theory to explain poltergeist activity has emerged, known as Electromagnetic Interference. Canadian scientist John Hutchison documented numerous findings on the paranormal effects of electromagnetic energy, which he produced in his laboratory. Many activities associated with the haunting of a poltergeist were replicated using electromagnetic technology. Objects levitated and vanished, mysterious fires broke out, strange lights appeared and the properties of solid objects, such as metal and wood, began to melt.



The Bold Street time slip cases in Liverpool are based on an actual account reported to have occurred in 1996. A former police officer was reported to have witnessed a time slip as he headed towards a bookstore while out shopping with his wife. Having stopped to talk to his friend just moments before the incident, the man's wife went ahead of him to buy a book. When he had parted ways with his friend, he visited another shop, before deciding to join his wife at the bookstore. Walking across the street towards the bookstore, he noticed that the name above the shop had changed to Cripps. An old-fashioned van with the name Cardin's painted on the side passed by. The rest of the cars on the street also appeared to be old-fashioned and dated back to the fifties. The people on the street were wearing dated clothes, typical of the fashion worn after the Second World War. As the man stood outside the former bookshop, he met a young woman wearing more modern-looking clothes. As they stood side by side, both of them were intrigued by the sight of the unfamiliar name above the shop and the fact that the window display showed women's fashion and accessories rather

than books. When they stepped inside the store, it suddenly turned back into a bookstore.



The Philadelphia Experiment of 1943, conducted by the US military on board the *USS Eldridge*, was rumoured to be a teleportation/early time travel experiment that went horribly wrong. The ship was reported to have completely disappeared during the experiment. When it reappeared, it became a scene of carnage as seamen and sailors had apparently become embedded in walls, doors and other metal objects.



The town of Albert was a focal point for the Allies behind enemy lines near the Somme battlefields during the First World War. In January 1915, the statue of the Madonna and Child perched at the top of the Basilica, in the centre of Albert, had been badly damaged and was knocked over at an angle. A superstition soon developed that the war would only end when the statue finally fell.



The character of Dr Walker is based on a real-life figure. Mary Edwards Walker, a qualified female physician, volunteered with the Union Army during the American Civil War. She served as an army surgeon in a time when women were not considered fit to serve as physicians. During the war she was captured by the Confederates after crossing enemy lines to treat wounded civilians. She was accused of being a spy and detained as a prisoner of war at Richmond, Virginia. She was known for her feminist views and noted for her unique dress sense: a short dress with men's trousers underneath. Her choice of dress was deemed to be inappropriate for society at that time.



During the Irish Rebellion of 1916, the incident of a ceasefire taking place in St Stephen's Green between the British and rebel forces to feed the ducks is based on fact. It is widely believed that Countess Markievicz did in fact shoot a man at St Stephen's Green, after which she was reported to have yelled the words, "I got him!"

The account of Commandant Mallin chastising a young boy for damaging a portrait of Queen Victoria at the Royal College of Surgeons is also based on fact.



In 1907, Rasputin, a Russian peasant and mystical faith healer with prophetic powers, miraculously healed Tsarevich Alexei from profuse bleeding due to haemophilia. Doctors had predicted that the young boy would die and yet through the power of Rasputin's prayers, he was healed and recovered within hours of their prediction. This phenomenal act brought Rasputin closer to the royal family and he served as a mystic advisor to Tsarina Alexandra.



Prior to the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, several passengers had premonitions, dreams and visions forewarning of the maritime disaster before it occurred. Some passengers sent letters and telegrams to loved ones mentioning their premonitions of doom, while others simply chose not to board the ship in the first place.

Passenger William Thomas Stead, a British journalist, wrote a fictional piece for publication prior to boarding the Titanic. In his article, he gave an account of a passenger on a White Star Line ship who encountered two ghosts from a ship that had sunk after hitting an iceberg. Such premonitions call into question the possi-

bility that these passengers had received prior warning from a parallel universe.



Fictional Realism is a theory based on the argument that given an infinite number of universes, everything must exist somewhere. Those who deem the theory to be true believe that every fictional character, every imagined universe and anything that is possible to be thought into existence, must exist somewhere in another realm. Our fantasies, nightmares and all that we can possibly imagine are thought to exist in alternate universes. History itself has shown us that every invention and physical creation known to man started out as a thought. Fictional Realism states that if you can think something into existence, it must be possible to create it. Telephones and computers are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to crossing the thin line between imagination and reality. Science fiction may be deemed the stuff of dreams, but without such dreams, technology would come to a sudden standstill. Space-ships and trips to alien planets were dreamed up by authors long before scientists followed in pursuit. Fiction shouldn't only be considered an avenue to escape reality, but should perhaps be thought of as a means of creating it.

Many events throughout time have never been recorded in history, but this doesn't mean that such events never actually occurred. Who's to say that China Winter won't exist at some stage in the future? Who's to say that she didn't already alter the course of events in a parallel universe?

Who's to say that this wasn't a true story?!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Nicell Treanor lives with her husband and two sons in Dundalk, Co. Louth, Ireland. A teacher by profession, Lisa is an artist and writer in her spare time. Her art and writing is heavily influenced by the steampunk genre as well as a love of historical and paranormal literature.

In 2016 Lisa worked as a set producer for a historical documentary for the Irish broadcasting station, RTE, in which she herself also played a small role.

With a keen interest in military re-enactment, an obsession with the paranormal and an imagination that never rests, Lisa decided to turn her hand to writing. “Once Upon a Time Slip” is the mind blowing result. This fusion of steampunk fantasy, history, romance and the paranormal is guaranteed to make readers question the very fabric of reality.

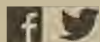
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ONCE UPON TIME SLIP

THE FUTURE WILL CRUMBLE AS HISTORY RE-WITES
ITSELF IN THE GREAT TIME TRAVEL APOCALYPSE.

It is the year 2258 when nineteen year old China Winter discovers her ability to cross the veil between worlds. On a quest to find her missing brother Maddox, she finds herself summoned by the father of time travel – Nikola Tesla to help save the whole of humanity; both past and future souls. China must sacrifice so much as she is dragged ever deeper into a treacherous and eternal time war.

Stepping back in time from her steampunk-esque existence, China finds herself caught up in the most incredible battles. Every army that ever existed can materialise in the wrong time or place, at any given moment to lay siege upon the earth. Slipping back and forth between the mists of time, history re-writes itself, playing havoc on the very fabric of reality. Can she survive the world of hauntings, poltergeist manifestations and time slips to save the universe from complete obliteration?

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